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THE LAST RUSTLER

THE LAST RUSTLER

THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
LEE SAGE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
PAUL S. CLOWES

LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
BOSTON 1930

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The author
dedicates this book to
HARVEY FERGUSSON
an artist-lover of
distant horizons
and the lure of unmarked trails

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FOREWORD · THE LAST RUSTLER

I first met Lee Sage in Salt Lake City in the summer of 1927. At that time he was trying to adjust himself to a settled life by acting as the manager of a riding school. It had never occurred to him that he might become a writer. He and I had many long talks and I was deeply impressed with his ability as a raconteur. Before leaving Salt Lake I suggested that he dictate the story of his adventures, little expecting that he would do so. About six months later I was surprised to receive from him a bulky manuscript which, with a little pruning and correcting, but without any rewriting, became "The Last Rustler."

That it is his own true story, told in his own words, I would not doubt even if I had never known the man. No one could write of such strange events and places with such intimate knowledge unless he had known them. But far more important than its literal truthfulness, it seems to me, is the obvious authenticity of the book as a bit of American folk literature.

The Western pioneers, from the first beaver trappers who pushed into the Rockies, to the last of the trail-riding cattlemen, all made an art of story-telling. Lacking books, they created a spoken literature of their own. They had their heroic sagas, their myths and legends, their songs, and there were gifted performers among them who were always in demand. Most of these men died without leaving any record of their talent. The pioneers who dictated their memoirs, such as Kit Carson and Uncle Dick Wooton, did so not because they were gifted story-tellers but because they were famous as scouts and fighters. Almost all these pioneer memoirs are bald outlines of events, lacking the observation of detail and the power of imagination that it takes to make a narrative live.

"The Last Rustler" is wholly a product of this Western tradition of camp-fire narrative. In it a true, pioneer story-teller has achieved the dignity and permanence of print. Doubtless he is one of the last of his kind and I make bold to say that he is one of the best. For this book is not the usual bare narrative of Western doings. Lee Sage catches the very form and color of events, the appearance and atmosphere of places, the characters of men, the intimate quality of his own emotion. He is a true artist working in an American tradition that owes nothing to any other culture, using as his medium an American dialect. His book is a valuable bit of Americana, a document of the first importance, but it is more than that. It is a work of art and a story of absorbing human interest.

HARVEY FERGUSSON

NEW YORK CITY
March, 1930

CONTENTS · THE LAST RUSTLER

I · THE ROOST 3
II · I CHANGE SADDLE HORSES 13
III · DAD ON THE WARPATH 22
IV · WHERE IS DAD? 29
V · OFF TO MARKET 41
VI · MY FIRST JOB 51
VII · MY FIRST CHASE 57
VIII · WOLF OR ME 66
IX · SPOOKING THE INDIANS 72
X · PIKE WAY 83
XI · BAY, THE STALLION 91
XII · ON THE TRAIL TO MEXICO 97
XIII · THE BORDER 110
XIV · SOUVENIRS 121
XV · CHICAGO 127
XVI · I GET A RAISE 140
XVII · ANOTHER CHANCE 146
XVIII · YELLOW FEVER 157
XIX · MY FIRST CANADIAN JOB 166
XX · A CROOK'S HAVEN 176
XXI · OLD FRIENDS AND NEW 187
XXII · MATRIMONIAL SWAMPS 200

XXIII · AN OUTLAW WOMAN 207
XXIV · I'M STAUMPED FREE 219
XXV · THE U. S. AGAIN 227
XXVI · I HEAR OF DAD 233
XXVII · DAD DEALS A HAND 245
XXVIII · THE HAND IS CALLED 255
XXIX · MOTHER 263
XXX · HIGH POWER 271
XXXI · MOONSHINING 283
XXXII · I MAKE A PROMISE 288
XXXIII · I TURN SHERIFF 294
XXXIV · GITTIN' FURTHER 299

THE LAST RUSTLER

CHAPTER I • THE ROOST

I was born in a dismal log shack, in the late eighties, the only native son of the Robber's Roost that laid in the southeast corner of Utah. It was a day's ride from the Colorado River. There, near the edge of a sun-scorched desert, where rim rocks twisted and wound into the sands, was a hiding place far away from the law, for bad men and crimes.

A red ledge lifted to the sky for hundreds of feet. At the foot of it a hidden spring of cool water boiled up through a bunch of black willows and moved slowly for a few paces before it sunk again in the sand. It was the only water for forty miles in any direction.

The Robber's Roost gang run from Montana to the Mexican border. Horse thieves and cattle rustlers brought home the bacon. These fellers believed that working was all took up before they was born. For horses they rode the cream of the country. Whenever one of them fellers lamped a good horse, he had it, if it did cost a man or two.

The earliest thing I remember was my old man and how much I admired him. The horse he couldn't ride never looked between two sandhills. He could handle a rope like double-geared lightning. He had as gentle a hand as ever touched a bridle rein. He could swing two guns out, barking quicker than Salt Peter could slam the gate on a hobo of sin. When it come to tracks, he could foller a wood tick on solid sandrock in the dark of the moon. If there was a bad man in that country, the old man had him eating out of his hand in no time. Dad wasn't much for size, but he could stir up more dust in five minutes than Noah's flood could settle in forty years.

When I was about four years old we moved northwest two hundred miles into a high mountain country among the Ute Indians. It was close to a great stock range. The game of rustling there was easier than down on the Robber's Roost. They could pick up a bunch of cattle and hide it in some canyon where one or two men could take it out with greater safety.

My first memories was all of grim men with searching eyes and silent mouths. They was slow in action but quick in thought. Each man's past was his own and nobody dared to ask about it.

Roxie was one of these men. He was a big, drowsy-looking feller that always seemed to be asleep, but nothing got past his half-closed eyes. He had a hawk eye, a keen, fast hand and limber arm, but still his body had the motion of a cub bear.

The old man and Roxie was partners in crime, but not brothers in bed. They didn't hitch up nowheres. There was just something in the daily lay-around that held them together.

The old man was quick in action and brain. Old Roxie was slower than the seven years' itch. He was so slow that if he laid down by the river to get a drink, the weeds would grow up around him and hide him. The only time I ever see Roxie get in a hurry was the time the matches in his seat pocket got on fire.

I noticed one day that Dad and Roxie was restless and watched the country close. I must have been in the way a little and made too much noise. The old man said, "Son, you'd better go out for a ride."

Roxie went out and caught my old white mule and boosted me on.

"A bit of air is what you need, Sonny," he said, as he whacked the mule.

They overlooked the fact the white mule's wishes had to be considered on any jaunt. I'd fell heir to him and an old pensioner bay horse they called Too Bad. This Too Bad was good to handle. He'd been well broke by a cowboy and was light on the rein. I could steer him most any place. But that flip-noozled, flop-eared white mule! He went where I wanted him to when he felt like it. Most generally I went with him to the corral.

This day he was on good behavior. He wiggled and twisted down the trail away from camp. The flies was a bit bad. He mosied into a bunch of willows and tried to rub me off. I spurred and whipped and dug and cussed and bawled. Finally he shook his head and took to the trail on a high trot. As I rounded a curve about two miles from camp the white mule throwed up his head and brayed. Fifty yards ahead of me a man on a black, bald-faced horse reined up and looked, spurred his old horse and went out of sight in the timber.

I'd overheard a few spooky stories about Injins, and men kidnapping boys, and I figured I'd better get back. I didn't have any trouble doing that. That old white mule was always naturally headed for home. Down the trail we galloped, his ears flopping on one end and his tail a-wringing on the other.

I rode into the corral and called Roxie, my old pal.

"Say, that feller down the trail sure has got one black horse!"

Roxie's eyes glistened. "What feller?"

"A tall feller on a black bald-faced horse."

Roxie's face twitched. He rode down the country in the direction of the rider. When he come back, he cornered me.

"Hey, come here, you little skunk. What did that horse look like?"

"Big black horse with white feet and white face!"

I was proud to think a man like Roxie would ask me the description of a horse. Such things made my blood tingle with the "growin'-itch".

Roxie sauntered over to the old man.

"This eagle-eyed kid has located something. . . ."

" What the hell!" the old man exclaimed.

"I examined the tracks and it looks like Headlight, that big black horse of Joe Rush."

"Sure enough, if that's Joe Rush's Headlight there's a nigger in the woodshed. That dirty yeller double-crosser never done any of this gang any good!"

The two rode down the valley to inspect the tracks. They returned in low conversation. Several times Roxie's hand went to his gun. Once he pulled it out and wiped it off.

That night the men didn't eat much supper, and then gathered up close by the old rock fireplace. I overheard a few words about moving that man from the scenery if he ever hit the sand in the low valley.

At last the old man spied me. "Hey, you little big-eared galoot. Time you hit the hay. The other kids is gone to bed long ago and here you are, wide awake!"

Mother called. I swore a bit under my breath, sure she didn't hear me, and made a high dive for bed.

Towards morning the two men stopped talking. Roxie went to the bunk house and Dad come to bed. Next morning after breakfast the men wrangled the horses. Roxie saddled his old gray beauty and took the track of the black horse.

I learned later that Joe Rush was an outlaw who at one time had been one of the main leaders of the Robber's Roost gang. He then turned yeller and fell in with the government! At times he worked with the Indians, if he was low on his own cut of bacon.

He sure was a bad actor. He never had any aim in living this-away but to feed his hunger for crime. He used the law to protect him in town. He used the Indians when he wanted to pull a deal of some kind and needed help. By feeding them plenty of whisky he kept agitation stirred up between them and the outlaws.

He could fan two guns quicker than hell could scorch a feather. Only God knows the number of men old Joe killed in his day. I don't believe killing women and children was any beneath him, either. That's a thing you don't often find among bad men. Most of them loves children and have lots of respect for women folks.

Joe carried two six-shooters and a sawed-off shotgun. When he was afraid of a close attack he strapped the sawed-off stock of his gun to his wrist, so nobody couldn't take it away from him. If you don't think a man will flinch from a shotgun when a killer's got it in his hand, you don't know cactus when yer setting on it.

The next morning when I got up and walked to the corral what should I see but Roxie's gray horse.

"Whee! By jickers! Roxie's back!"

I wanted to go to the bunk house and wake him, but I'd had better training than to disturb them fellers. When he come out, him and the old man went off to the saddle shed to talk. I sunk down through the corral and put my ear to the cracks and listened.

"They've kinda got us on the run," Dad was saying. "I figure Joe Rush is stalking Silver Tip and the cash. Red Fingernail ain't quits, either."

Roxie said, "It's funny Silver Tip ain't showed up by now."

The old man spoke up. "Well, I figure it this-away. Silver's getting old and about had his day. Hard rides and trips tells on him. He's probably figured we was all young and still able to move. He'd take the money from Castle Gate, leave the country, land in some unknown place and play gentleman the rest of his life."

"For my part I don't care," Roxie put in. "If he's done that, he sure gave Joe Rush the jump. Guess that's what Joe was doing down in the old Roost on the sand."

"Yep, his tracks led in there all right. He'd been there the night before I got in."

Old Joe, being once one of the Roosters, knowed all the trails. That was the thing the outlaws feared. Roxie said Joe had crawled on a ledge close by their camp fire and when they was all busy cooking supper he jumped down among them and commenced to shoot. They scattered, but several was killed and some wounded. Joe crawled off in the bushes. Later, one of the outlaws had seen a man and horse in the distance, plodding across the sand. The outlaw's horse was tired, so he did not foller. They supposed he headed for the law again for reinforcements. If he come back, there would be hell popping.

The old man said, "Doggie! I wisht I'd follered that yeller hound. He either went to law or he's sneaking around here, and we'll sure find out!"

"Well, him and the Indians may keep us on the move, Pat."

The tone of their voices raised as they cursed the Indians. Roxie said, "By gosh! I noticed a barefooted pony track crossin' the trail as I rode in, jest the other side of the creek."

The men saddled their horses. Each one took an extra rifle. The old man took the pony tracks where Roxie showed them to him. Roxie went for some help about ten miles away. Three other outlaws was camped over in the rim at the head of Burnt Hollow, where they held the big herd of stolen stock when rustlers brought it in.

Roxie was back before sundown with two big rough-looking cowboys. They stopped at the house for a lunch, then took out on the trail of the old man.

That night Mother set in an old rocking-chair in front of the fireplace, and told us children stories of people that lived in peace and civilization and that some day she'd like to be there too. She didn't want us boys to pick up the tracks of this outlaw gang.

But that didn't sound good to me. I wanted to ride good horses, fan the free breeze and carry the law in my pocket as my Dad was doing.

Mother shooed us off to bed. We soon fell to sleep. In the night I wakened. Dad was pounding at the door, calling for Mother to unlatch it. She pulled the bolt and he rushed to the cupboard and got three boxes of Winchester shells.

I saw one whole leg of his chaps was covered with blood. Mother looked straight at it, then turned to me. I couldn't see her very plain by the flickering candlelight, but the note of pleading in her voice as she caught the old man by the shoulders, threw her arms around his neck and begged for him not to go pulled me out of bed. I locked my arms around the bloody leg.

The old man was hard and cold. He pushed us away, dashed through the door and was gone. Quick as a flash the rattling of spurs and the heavy pounding of hoofs died away on the trail. Soon they was taken up again by the slow, heavy plod of a horse.

Mother slammed the door and bolted it. The slow steps drawed closer and then the moaning voice of a man was heard. A minute later he fell against the door. Mother grabbed her six-shooter from the shelf, unbolted the door and drawed a death bead as the heavy body rolled onto the floor. She recognized one of the rustlers that had went with Roxie.

With what little help I could give her we tugged him inside, closed and bolted the door again. The blood oozed from his shoulder and run in a stream on the floor. Mother tore his shirt loose. She flinched when she saw the bullet hole just to the right of his heart. He gasped and froth and blood come from his mouth. Mother tried to give him water. But he only gurgled and it run down his neck. Then rifle shots was heard outside. Mother blowed out the candle. The man on the floor moaned. Mother watched through the small window in the west end of the shack.

I was about ninety per cent. scart, but yet I wanted to do something so I crawled over and felt of the man on the floor. Just then Roxie knocked at the door and called, "Pardon me, lady, but I got to come in."

Mother told me to unbolt the door. Roxie stumbled over the body.

"What in the hell?"

He lit a match and looked at the man. He grinned, saying, "Are you the doctor, Son?"

In a slow soft tone he spoke to Mother. "Don't be excited. It's all over now."

The rustler on the floor stirred. Roxie picked him up and carried him to the bunk house. Then he returned, and told Mother and I the story of what had happened. Dad had crept close to the Indian camp. There was about fifteen of them and one held the lookout post. Dad had slipped by him some way and got between him and his camp. That left the Indian on the sky line for the old man. Dad was worked up to such a pitch he just blazed loose and killed him.

He took to a thick underbrush, and the Indians had him surrounded. They was firing steadily into the bushes when Roxie and the other two outlaws rode up and opened fire from the sky line.

Many of the Indians was killed before they knowed what had happened. One at a time they was picked off.

CHAPTER II · I CHANGE SADDLE HORSES

A few days later one of the rustlers brought in my old white mule and bay horse, Too Bad. He come over to me and says, "Here's yer darn mule. Now see if you can ride the tail off him. We've had grief enough holding that old goof every night. I wondered why yer Dad wanted him brought along. I see now!"

Now that was a kind spot in the old man's heart! He made it plain to every rider to always bring that white mule in at any cost. That may not sound like much to you folks, but it was a whole lot to me!

I remember pretty plain the nice little playhouses and dolls and things my brother and sister had up under the ledge by the house. Every time I got close to them, they commenced to yell their fool heads off.

"Get away from here; you'll break something!"

Somehow, every time I'd get close, I'd stumble or something would go wrong. It meant something broke or something tore down. They figured if I didn't do it on purpose, I'd do it anyway. Them always jawing and scolding, I soon lost my hankering for society and drifted back to the corral where I found intelligence enough to stand for my sticking around.

I spent many days skulking. I rode my plugs in turns. Too Bad had more turns than the white mule. Though by this time I'd fallen heir to a pair of spurs, there was days when the white mule wouldn't leave camp with me.

I rode to the top of the high hot rims and watched the dull country round about. I often hid by the side of the trails where riders passed. Every rider in that country knowed the white mule's track. Some would take to the track and root me out of my hiding place, while others just smiled and rode on.

Dad warned me many a time not to go too far, but I always wondered what was on the other side of each ridge. Every day I ventured farther away. My rides was growing longer and I spent less time in camp until skulking Indians was seen in the country. Then Mother growed worried and made me stay close to the house for several days till it wore off.

One day a rider by the name of Blue John strolled in. He had a bunch of weary-looking horses. Among them was one black pony. It was tired and poor.

Old John said, "If you want that pony, kid, you can have him."

I growed a foot! It was no sooner said than I had my twine around his neck. I led him over to the granary and give him a feed of oats.

"Hey, there, you young buzzard," cried the old man. "Them air oats cost money and you needn't think you can feed them to every mongrel that comes along!"

"I reckon I got some oats in that granary," old John said. "And if that kid wants them, he can have them. I had a boy like that one once, but diphtheria took him away."

I poured the grain into the old pony. He growed stronger, and at last I could ride him as far as ten miles from camp. I used to skulk along on the edges of the timber and watch. Often I saw horses and riders drift by. I come to learn that a good many of them dodged the old camp, but a thing like that didn't raise my curiosity.

From the day that Blue John give me Coalie, that black pony, I belonged to the open hills.

One day, after a long fast jaunt, Coalie and I stopped at the edge of a clump of cedars. I was busy marking out some brands in the sand when Coalie raised his head and sniffed the air. I looked in the same direction he did. I knowed horses never looked that way unless they was watching something.

Soon I located small objects crossing the flat. They strung out in uneven distances apart from one another. I figured it must be riders. When they drawed closer, I saw it was Indians. Coalie and I snuk back into the timber out of sight. I shivered a little for a minute and wished I was home with Mother. As they passed me in single file, I recognized them as some of the Indians from Red Fingernail's range. Red Beaver, his brother, was right among them. His fat sides shook as his tired pony plodded along. These were the Southern Ute Indians, and they still run wild.

They did not stay on the trail, which I thought was funny. I watched till they disappeared in the southwest. Then I swung onto Coalie. I spanked him every jump. When the ranch folks seen me coming over the hill in such a hurry the old man come out to meet me. His face was set.

"What's happened, Sonny?" he said.

He knowed something was wrong, for I didn't often ride my horse fast like that. I told him I'd seen Red Beaver and his tribe, where they'd come from, and where he'd be able to find tracks.

"Pretty wise kid, you are; you'll be of use to this gang some day!"

He didn't lose no time in saddling and taking for the tracks. He never returned that night. It was late the following afternoon when he come back. His horse was gaunt. A caked, dry sweat covered him from head to foot. I'll always remember how that horse looked — as though he'd been rode through red-hot hell.

I heard Dad tell Mother he struck the track and follered them till they was crossed by the track of Joe Rush's black horse.

He said, "Now them devilish Injuns and old Joe ain't over in this country picking posies in the sagebrush!"

Soon another rider rolled in. His horse was rode to a finish. He et a bite of dinner and then the old man and him went out by the saddle shed to talk. I could tell by the motion of their hands there was a red-hot flame on the wind somewheres.

Dad told me later the rider had been hounding Joe Rush. Joe had mixed with the Indians, fanned the old flame of their hatred for the rustlers, and got it to burning bright again under the Indians' hides. He told them the rustlers had stole a lot of their horses and took them over to the Roost. They had come down from the north in their war paint. Each day was adding to their numbers. Joe was doing the skulking, was to get the lay of the land and give the signal for attack.

About evening the rider mounted a fresh horse and rode for reinforcements. Dad and the rest busied themselves cleaning rifles and polishing six-shooters, shoeing horses and fixing saddles. The next day the riders commenced to stream in. Mother was busy cooking for the hungry rustlers all day and had little time to spend on us children.

Every one met and talked to the old man, got his orders and walked away in silence.

I growed restless. I thought probably they was overlooking a bet. I'd just go out and do a little postwatch myself.

I had no more than picked a comfortable spot behind some sandrocks and hid the pony, when I seen a dark object coming. As he rode up close enough I seen the white streak in the black horse's face. I shuddered. I remembered what Roxie and Dad had said about the dark crimes of old Joe.

Well, now, whatever got into that fool pony I don't know. He come out from behind his rock and headed straight towards camp. There I was about a mile from camp with old Joe, the dead shot, between me and Dad. If Dad could only see me now!

Old Joe had got past by now and that fool pony run right up directly behind him. The minute he heard that pony he whirled his horse with his hand on his gun. He looked all around and back towards the tracks of the pony. Something was bothering him. He lifted his hat and scratched his head. That's a sure sign of trouble! Then he let the pony go round him.

The pony dashed down the ridge towards camp. I thought, "What will Mother do when the pony comes in alone?"

That was the first time that fool pony had ever done a trick like that, and it looked like a fatal one.

Old Joe swung off to the right into the rim rocks. I knowed the minute that pony hit camp somebody would be back on its track to find me. It meant death to the man that come! Old Joe would sure ambush him.

The minutes seemed like hours; finally a rider appeared back-tracking the pony. Joe must have misjudged this, for the rider seen Joe first. Both men whirled their horses at the same time. Two hasty shots was fired and both men whipped out of sight. I don't know where the rider went. Soon old Joe appeared, riding directly my way.

I slunk back against the rock and shuddered. If I only had a gun! I was scart!

He rode straight for me until he got within one hundred yards. He hid his horse and took back towards the rider afoot, keeping himself well under cover as he went. When he got about two hundred yards away, I begun to feel a little bit better.

I set and watched. I dreaded the moment when them two would come face to face. They didn't lose much time. Two shots was fired and the rider fell from his horse. Old Joe started back in my direction.

I said to myself, "Old man, you won't git me!"

I made a dash for his horse. He couldn't see me, nor the horse either.

How that black-faced demon did whistle and snort when I come near him! I loosened his bridle reins and led him to a big rock. There I mounted and made away.

I was riding him easy, but to make safe from old Joe I held tight to the horn, for fear I'd fall off. He run so fast he made the hair on my head pull.

He'd been well broke and I could steer him easy in the right direction. I made to the south through a patch of timber. Then I turned east. Two shots was fired. I kicked the black horse and we outrun whoever fired them.

What a race that was! The smallest outlaw in the country and the black Headlight horse with the worst reputation in the crooked game!

Our post man sure did wake up, when he seen me coming and recognized the horse. He thought it was Joe! I come around some rim rocks and he stepped out with a thirty-thirty in my face. When he saw who it was he dropped his gun and hollered, "What the hell you doin' with that horse? Where'd you git him, you little skunk!"

I told him what had happened. He headed straight for the trouble. I turned the bald horse down the trail for camp, and I fanned him every jump. He didn't need any fanning, but it helped my flagging spirit.

When I pulled in sight of camp every one was gathered in the yard, moving like a swarm of bees. Men was on their horses, ready to take the trail of my pony. When they seen that black horse they recognized him on first sight. Every man's hand was on his gun. As I drawed closer they turned to stone. I reined him up in front of the crowd. The old man won't be no stiffer after he's dead. He pulled me off the horse.

"Son, what does this mean?"

I tried to tell him. Mother couldn't speak. She run up and grabbed me in both arms. The boys looked the old horse over and asked, "Where's Joe?" Again I told the story of what had happened on the hill.

One old feller exclaimed, "Wouldn't that grab yer face and twist it! Say, old man, how old is that kid?"

"Well, he ain't very old, but I reckon he's old enough! And all you trouble-bouncers want to look out before he gits growed up!"

In less than ten minutes every man was headed up the trail towards old Joe Rush. That night they returned. I overheard the conversation of what had happened to the rustler. They intended to bury him in the morning. Nothing could be found of old Joe but his tracks. He'd stopped and lit a cigarette. Bits of rag was found there. Looked like he tore up his shirt to stop the bleeding of a wound.

The next morning about ten o'clock the man was carried out and laid on a board in the sun. He was shot through and through. Another victim of that snake! Every man swore vengeance on Joe Rush.

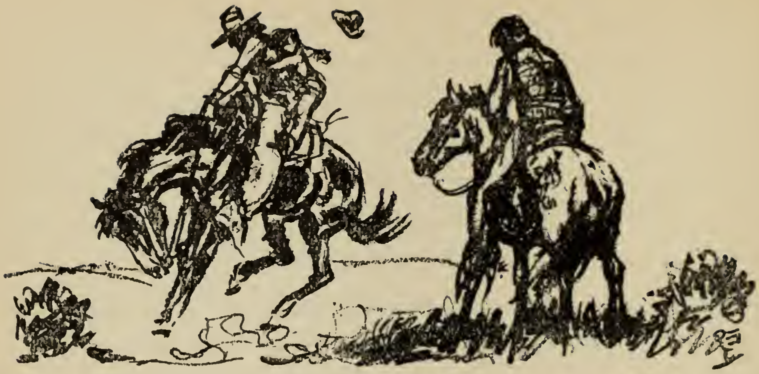
One of the boys said, "What yer goin' to do with that bally horse?"

Tickles spoke up. "I reckon you'll ask that kid what yer goin' to do with him. That's his horse from now on or I don't know my oats!"

Every man sanctioned his word.

Some feller said, "But old Joe will be devil-bent on the trail of that horse!"

I guess I growed two feet that time! I was just a wart of a kid, but anyway, I was riding the best horse in the country that belonged to the worst man on earth.



CHAPTER III · DAD ON THE WARPATH

That night slipped by peaceful. The next morning a feller named Smoky brought the horses in. He called:

"Hey, Kid, here's your darlin'. You'd better keep your fingers on him. It's a cinch if old Joe don't pass in from that bullet hole, him and Red Beaver will be trackin' that horse. No use leadin' him to the granary to feed him oats. I reckon he'll be more than you can handle without 'em."

Headlight took a sniff at me and whistled. He whirled on his hind feet, jerked the rope out of my hand and run behind the corral. One of the boys brought him back.

"You're a hell of a puncher! Take it from me if you don't git next to that horse with kindness, you won't git next at all. They ain't a cowboy this side of Satan's Roost can hold that old horse if he ever bows his neck!"

"Well, then, I've got to have some oats," I said. "He ain't goin' to like me if he don't git somethin' out of it."

I could tell by the way every outlaw in that bunch looked at the horse they wished they owned him. I fed him a bit and then commenced petting him gently on the neck. He must have thought I was a curiosity, being so small. He soon give in. I guess he liked my weight. He carried me around the camp as if I'd been a horsefly.

Several days went by quietly. The men figured old Joe had got badly shot up and slowed the game or else the Indians was making more preparations. The red devils' tracks showed up every place and one at a time the outlaws was picking them off, when they found them out in the brush. The trails in that country was made and used by everybody. No man was ever harmed who stayed on them and rode peaceable along.

One day an Indian called Tee Walk rode into the yard. As he looked the horses over around the place his eyes set fast on Headlight. He give the secret of his trip away right there.

Smoky spoke up. "Now, you red devil, you jest take yer mind off that. You won't git yer fingers on him. If you don't git on down the trail, I'll fill yer hide so full of holes it won't hold corn fodder."

The Indian sniffed and rode away. Smoky said, "I guess I'll take that red snake's track, and find out what they're doin'."

Some time that evening the Indian pulled into his own camp. Smoky wasn't far behind. He crept close and watched the camp until he spotted old Joe. He said the next morning old Joe was a sick-looking man. He reckoned as soon as he was patched up there would be real trouble.

Tickles said, "I reckon I ain't goin' to wait fer him to patch up. If the kid will let me ride Headlight, I'll plug old Joe before long."

Smoky told him exactly where to find the camp. He took the trail and that evening was close to it. The Indians had a post guard out. The outlaw rode onto him unawares. The Indian took a shot at him but missed. Tickles didn't say just how he done it but he put that red devil out. It disturbed the rest of them in camp.

Tickles picked him a hiding place behind a rock and plugged a couple. The Indians got so blasted thick he had to leave. One Indian grabbed Headlight to make a getaway. He hadn't any more than straddled him when a rifle sounded. He fell. The black horse snorted, took a kick at him, and whirled to the north.

I guess Tickles found it pretty hot for him then. He managed to plug a couple or three more before he got a slight wound in his hip. Two days later he pulled into camp, weary and afoot. The wound was only a flesh wound, but it sure had bled. The blood was caked and mixed with dirt. It made his leg a pretty hard-looking sight.

The old man and a couple of boys dressed the wound. He was hot.

"I'll git 'em, boys, I'll git 'em! All you damn punchers that ain't scart of yer necks come on!"

They packed up a few provisions and left. I thought

I'd join the party. The old man let me ride four or five miles with them to make up for my losing Headlight. Coming back, I cut across country to the west to make a slight circle around camp. There I struck a fresh horse track. It showed that the bridle reins had been dragging. That meant a lost horse.

My blood tingled. "I'll bet it's Headlight!"

I took the tracks and follered several miles. I follered till it got dark. Then I set out for home. Mother was in a panic when I got there. I'll admit they was a little cold with me that night. I took my troubles and packed off to bed.

Early the next morning before Mother woke up, I sneaked out of the house, saddled old Coalie and took for the tracks. I hadn't gone only a few yards up the trail when I met Headlight face to face. How my spirits did raise about that time!

I tried to catch the bridle reins, but Headlight wouldn't stand for that. I jumped off and walked up to him. He whistled at me first, then come up and put his nose on me. I held the bridle reins while I crawled on old Coalie and headed down the trail leading the black.

Mother hadn't missed me out of bed. When she heard the horses she come to the door.

"Hey, young feller, if you don't stay in the house and quit this skulkin' around, I'll lock you in the cellar till yer Dad comes home."

Well, I dropped my head and took the old horse down and tied him to the hitch rack. Say, that fool Tickles had cinched his saddle too darn tight. The cinch had cut into the horse and swelled him up underneath his stomach. It was creased in the swelling and almost hid. When I started loosening the cinch, Headlight looked round at me. That seemed to be just what he wanted. After the saddle was laid off, I fed him some oats and petted him a bit.

About that time two of the riders come back. The old man decided there should be more protection at camp and sent them back to watch.

The third day after that at dinner Mother had a forlorn look on her face. She said, "I wish that black horse was dead. I know somebody will be back after him and it will wind up in more bloodshed!"

Just then a gray horse whipped down the trail, slid up in front of the corral and stopped. The saddle was hanging underneath the gray's stomach and one bridle rein was broke off.

Tickles jumped to his feet. "Gad! that's Pat's horse!"

They decided to take the trail to see what had happened. It looked like death for the old man. Tickles tried to cheer Mother by telling her not to worry, the old man could sure take care of himself. Then they both hit up the trail.

I stood and watched them ride off. I wished I was going too. I wandered over towards the black horse. I had just started to saddle him up when Mother come out.

"Young feller, you ain't goin' nowheres and you git it out of yer head!"

She turned the black horse loose. That pretty near broke me up in business. I thought sure he would be gone. I figured he'd go north to his old range.

Mother took me by the arm. "Young feller, settle yerself!" I damn sure was settled. My heart bogged down to my toes.

All the while Mother had a six-shooter in her apron pocket. Tickles was the only man left in camp to watch. He took his Winchester under his arm and asked if we had some cartridges to fit it. Mother found him two packages.

He thanked her. "Lady, don't worry," he said, "I'll be clost at hand."

I peered through the small window in the house and watched him go up the hill. He found a hiding place among some brush. I could hardly see him myself and I watched him hide there. He watched all night, Mother said.

The next morning at breakfast Tickles said, "That was some night! I don't reckon I ever was scart, but I do get lonesome! For one man to watch this place alone is enough to send him to the cuckoo house."

Mother didn't answer. She was thinking about Dad and what she'd do with us, I guess.

Tickles pulled my ears. "Say, Kid, what kind of a witch have you got on that black, anyway? He either likes this place powerful well or you've got him hoodooed."

At that I perked up. "Did you see my old plug sticking around this morning?"

"Yep, he's over there behind that sand knoll. I reckon he'll be comin' in after his oats directly."

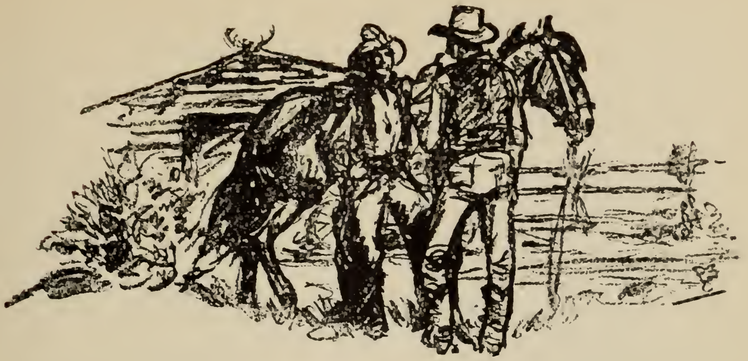
Mother spoke up. "Well, Son, I guess if it's your choice to have that old horse, you'll have him. This family won't git a bit of peace if you don't. It just thrills your old Dad pink to see you hazin' him around. For myself, I wish he was in purgatory."

Mother had give in! I was happy. I swallered my breakfast galump and went out after Headlight. I'll be darned if he didn't come trotting over to me before I got the oats. We plugged around all morning.

The day was hazy and hot. A few clouds raised in the west and threatened storm. Tickles moved around restless on his game leg. About four o'clock in the afternoon it started to rain. Rain wasn't no name for it. The water run down the sidehills and through the corrals in young rivers.

Tickles said, "Boy, I've seen a lot of rain in this country, but this one takes the cake! This is kinder the way it rains in the north country where I was born. A few rains like this and the country would be washed flat!"

This weather kept all but Tickles in the house. He hung to his post in the old saddle shed. It leaked but he stood guard. About ten o'clock that night the rain quit. We was a gloomy bunch without any word from Dad, and Mother stacked us in bed early.



CHAPTER IV · WHERE IS DAD?

Some time along about midnight, I heard a pounding on the door. I slipped out of bed and answered it. The rough voice of a rustler named Go-Easy asked, "Son, is Pat here?"

At that Mother called through the wall, "What's the trouble?"

"Everything. We've had a bloody fight with the Injins. Half the outfit's been shot up and nobody has seen Pat since."

Mother's voice trembled. "He isn't here. What can be done about it?"

"Nuthin' till daylight."

Now, this didn't sound good to me. The outlaw walked away.

Next morning at the breakfast table Go-Easy told the story of the fight.

"It was about noon," he said, "when we rode up close to the Indian camp. The Indians had us outnumbered with big odds. They was hid in the heavy timber and ready for battle. A small valley laid between us.

"As we come out of the timber on the other side, they opened fire. Our outfit whirled back, split in half and Pat took the bunch to the north. I swung south with the others. Another bunch of Indians charged us from behind. Every man dropped from his horse and found cover. Then the Indians circled in from both sides. What horses of ours wasn't killed, run away.

"For a couple of hours it was steady fire. Indians yelled as our rifles barked from behind the fallen logs. Several times they tried to advance but each time they was forced back, leaving a few behind them. Our men stuck close to their hidin' places. That's what saved us.

"Soon the Indians in front of us run to the middle of the flat. We'd cleaned up the bunch behind us pretty slick. Our two bunches closed in together and crowded to the edge of the timber. It was easy pickin's then, because they was in the open and we had cover.

"Pat and about half of the bunch run straight at them. The rest of us went south towards the bunch of timber the Indians was headed for, to pick them off on the other side as Pat drove them through. We made a real slaughter before they seen us. As the Indian horses dropped back we mounted them and follered in the chase.

"Pat and Smoky was right in the lead when they entered the timber and that's the last I seen of them. The Indians scattered and kept goin'. We rushed to their camp and hid. A few of them tried to come in. We piled them up as they entered the flat. There couldn't have been but a few left. The rest of the boys stayed to clean up the camp and to help what men we had crippled. I come in to see if Pat had showed up."

Mother's face growed pale as he told the story. When he finished she moved back and went in the other room. I went out with Tickles to the corral and throwed my saddle on Headlight.

"Where're yer goin', Sonny?" Tickles asked.

"I ain't goin' nowheres. Mother won't let me!"

"Well, where do yer want to go?"

"I want to go and find Dad!"

At that the cowboys laughed. "You couldn't find him."

"Yes, but by jickers, I reckon I could try."

"Now looky here, Son, every man in this outfit has looked for him."

"Well, listen here, where did you last see him?"

"Right over on the north side of the Indian camp."

"Well, what do you think happened to him?"

"Maybe he got plugged and fell off his horse and the darn fool come home. I wouldn't doubt but what it was Joe that plugged him, if he was able to."

I growed cold. For awhile I wished I didn't have any mother. If she was out of the way, I'd be on the trail. At that, I made up my mind to go, anyhow. I walked up to the house. I saw a few tears come to my mother's eyes, and I asked if there was anything I could do to help. She said no. Then I asked if I could go for a little ride.

"Well, you can go, if you won't go far. You'd better ride out to the north. But you'll have to ride Coalie. You can't ride that black horse."

I said, "Old Coalie ain't in here to-day."

He was. He was out in the corral among the other horses. I knowed she never seen him, for she hadn't been out. One of the rustlers looked straight at me and started to say something, but changed his mind. I guess he was going to watch and see what I'd do.

I mounted Headlight and started north. The boys all seen me leave and waved good-bye. They bunched together and begun to talk. I knowed I wasn't fooling them any. They hated to see me go. At the same time they loved to see the outlaw stick out in a kid. They figured I'd just go out and circle round camp and head for the south. They was right.

After I had made a circle around camp and was headed south again, I hit the main trail. All at once I realized I might meet somebody, so I turned off the trail and headed through the timber. I kept under cover as much as possible, riding from one bunch of trees to the other.

Suddenly I saw something coming up the trail I'd left. It was a man who wore a black hat like Dad's, but it wasn't him! Behind the black hat follered other men, several pack horses and a good many loose ones. I could see robes and blankets. I eyed every man. Dad wasn't there! It was the rest of the rustlers coming in, with the loot from the Indian camp.

At that I whirled my horse off towards the south. I was leaning ahead in my saddle and riding at a good pace. My eyes was filled with tears till I could scarcely see the direction I was traveling.

I must have plodded on some fifteen miles. The sun was hot, and my not being able to reach the stirrups made riding a little difficult. I reined Headlight up to take a rest. I didn't know where I was going. I was just looking for Dad!

I heard the timber crack a few feet from me. Then I heard a groan. Now I was frightened. I didn't know whether to go over there or stay away. It might be Dad. It might be an Indian. Maybe it was old Joe!

About this time the horse snorted. Again something stirred. The first thing that come in sight was the blue steel of a forty-four, and after it a man's face.

It was Dad! I hollered, and made a dash for him.

Dad spoke in low words. "Sonny, what you doin' here? Where's yer mother? Are they all well at camp?"

"Yes, but how did you get here, Dad?"

"One of them damned Indians plugged me through the shoulder. I toppled off my horse. It kicked me and run away. I couldn't catch it, so I took it afoot. I sauntered into a sheep camp last night, found some grub and things there. Nobody home, so I just rested up over the night and headed down here this morning. I've been bleeding a lot and I 'm pretty weak. You'd better go for help."

"Can't we ride this black horse?"

"Not with my game leg, Sonny. He'd throw me higher than Gilroy's kite. The old pony kicked me on the hip when he left, and that's made travelin' pretty slow."

I scratched my head.

"Well, you lay still, Dad. I'll go to the trail. Perhaps I'll meet somebody and can get help."

A voice interrupted me. "Hello there, you little horsefly. Are you in the timber?"

The old man grabbed his gun.

"Who are you?"

"Go-Easy," the voice answered.

"That don't make you Go-Easy because you say you are. Show yourself! What are you doin' here?"

"I've been follerin' that ornery kid's tracks. His mother sent me after him. I ain't feelin' much like chasin' kids to-day, nohow. After that rumpus with the Injins a sleep would look good to a man."

The voice came through the timber, drawing close.

"Hell, Pat! Are you there?"

"Yes, sir, come on in!" Dad answered.

Go-Easy come peering through the timber.

"Say there, kid, you are the youngest misfortune I ever seen. What kind of a witchcraft hangs over you, anyhow?"

"Nuthin'. I just stopped here to rest and found Dad."

"Are you hurt bad, Pat?"

"Oh! I'm disarranged. What I need is camp."

We lifted the old man up. He crawled on Go-Easy's horse.

Go-Easy said, "Kid, how we two goin' to ride Headlight?"

"I reckon we can ride him if one gets behind."

We tried it. Go-Easy got in the saddle. I climbed on behind. Headlight had a different idee. He dropped his head and went to pitching. He stacked us up in a heap on the ground. We got up, neither one of us hurt.

The old man said, "Pretty good show, boys; try it again."

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"Danged if I will!" said Go-Easy. "Let the kid ride on behind you, Pat. That horse is big and stout."

"That's a good idee. Maybe he can steady me a bit. I'm gettin' weak."

We started. The trip was hard and slow, for the old man couldn't ride fast. We reached camp sometime after dark. Mother didn't know what she was doing. My brother and sister was both crying.

You can bet your boots every man on that outfit got busy dressing up the old man. Mother fixed hot water and bandages. She never realized just how bad he was hit until they had the blood and dirt washed off. Then she got shaky. He was bored straight through!

That's the only time I ever seed the old man soften in the least. He was shocked all over. One of the boys remarked he guessed Dad's best days was over.

"When a man starts to go tender in this game it's only a matter of a while until he fades out!"

Mother was quiet about the house. She wanted to make things peaceable for him. All night long she sat up and bathed the wound. Several times I wakened and heard them talking in low tones. They was glad to be with one another again.

By the dim light of a half-burned candle I saw the old man's face. It was dark but there was a sort of softness in it that night. Mother's face looked white and wearied though there was a bright twinkle in her eye I hadn't seen for months.

The conversation was on a different line than any I had heard before. I could tell they was planning something. I don't reckon any two people ever thought more of one another than they did. When things was running smooth they was sort of distant. But just let trouble or sickness show up, although the old man was rough, they drawed close together and was as one.

Once when Mother rose to change the water on the bandage, I saw her hand go to her throat like it was catching a sob, but her face was set peaceful and her returning step was swift and gentle like. I felt sort of glad. I didn't know why.

Just at the crack of day, three whistles was heard outside. The old man raised on his elbow.

"Tell that feller I'm done with these crooked deals." Then he grabbed himself. "Oh! No! Not that." He dropped back on his pillow.

Mother hastened to the door. I knowed them three whistles. I'd heard them at the old camp in the timber. My mind run back to the blood-stained messages Roxie said he always carried.

Mother stepped out to talk. Soon she come back. By this time Dad's eyes was blazing.

"What's he got on his mind?"

I raised up in bed.

"Lay back down there, you young eagle eye. Yer darned easy disturbed for a kid, or else you're always awake at the wrong time."

Mother must have told Silver Tip what was wrong. He didn't show up until breakfast was called.

This was my first slant at old Silver Tip. Nobody told me his name, but I knowed him on sight, from what I'd heard. He was tall and lean and gaunt, very gaunt in the middle. He had the searching eye of a buzzard. His hair was snow-white although I don't reckon he was out of his forties. That's where he got the name, Silver Tip.

You could see he was keen-edged like the blade of a razor. His eyes punched holes in you. Every movement that man made was slick and quick. He always seemed to be strained to attention. When you mentioned Silver Tip, every man looked as though he'd been touched with a sharp point of a dagger.

He walked straight, with a long quick step. That's unusual for a rider. They generally grow stiff and wabbly. Their hips get tied someway and they hitch along from their knees as if still standing in their stirrups. Silver Tip's legs was sort of bowed but not as much as you'd expect of legs that length.

The old man and Silver Tip was glad to see each other. Their eyes met as they gripped hands.

"I passed the place yesterday," Silver said. "Looks like you finished up that bunch of Indians for keeps. I am sorry to find you got plugged."

The old man grinned. "Oh! I'll be trackin' again in a few days. It was a good job well done, only that yeller cur Joe Rush slipped by us again. I heerd you had a close call yerself over in the Sinbad country with the Castle Gate money."

"That I did. I've been on the run ever since. The boys say Joe was after me to dip into that cash himself. When the law and some of them other birds quieten down over there, we'll go get it."

"Is it well cached?" Dad asked.

"If it's ever found," replied Silver, "it will be me that does it."

"Well, Dutch gettin' killed and Roxie evaporatin' leaves it a fifty-fifty split between me and you."

"That's a go," said Silver. "But what I want to tell you is this. That north country is gettin' damned well warmed up. The cattle men is buzzin' around like a nest of hornets and the first thing we know the law, Indians and stockmen will all be over here, wound up and hell-bent to git their stuff. They imagine a trip to market for us now would put us all on Wall Street. What I want is a move and a darned quick one."

"Well, that's halfway what I want," the old man said. "I've got more at stake here than any man in the outfit and I reckon every man has about enough stuff stole up. Besides, the stuff that belonged to the boys that got killed in the last year will be equally split with what's on the ground floor now."

Dad spied me. "Now, run along, Sonny. We don't need your beak in this."

I hiked for the corral. Headlight beat me to it. He was standing there waiting for some oats. He got some too! I saddled him up. I felt like I weighed a ton, six feet high. You may be sure I made it a point to ride slow past the house. Silver Tip didn't disappoint me!

"What the hell!" he said. "That looks like Joe's Headlight horse and sure enough it is! No, it can't be . . . that kid couldn't ride him!"

"Well, now, you'd be surprised," the old man put in. "That's him!"

I left Dad to finish the story. I'd almost swear it was finished right. The old man was proud clear up to his ears over my capturing that black horse.

Silver's word to go spread through the camp like wildfire. The men talked fast and free. Every one had a cheerful twitch in his git-along. They moved about mending saddles and pack outfits. It sounded like springtime around there. All the men was whistling like mocking birds.

The injured was mending fast with Mother to help them along. Her and Dad had a long conversation up to the house. If I'd 'a' knowed what that move meant, I wouldn't have been so tickled. The first thought come to my mind was, would they let me take the black horse along. You bet I wasn't long slipping up and asking Dad.

"Sure, Sonny, you can take him to bed with you if you want to." Mother commenced to arrange things. I thought she was getting the bed ready, but she turned to fixing up about the house.

CHAPTER V · OFF TO MARKET

Days slipped by, a couple of them. That gittin'-ready action hooked us all. It wasn't that old jolty wagon this time we moved in. It was a long string of pack horses and each one of us was mounted and in a saddle.

Sister rode old Coalie and cantered along easy. Some women folks takes to riding natural and I think there was a trace of the old blood in her. Brother sure didn't have any!

For one week we drifted on towards the Colorado River southeast to Lee's Ferry. The cattle commenced to get tired and leg-weary. This caused the rustlers to ride faster and swear louder. A regular blue smoke raised from that outfit when that boy Smoky started in. He knowed how to swear in paragraphs, long ones, and had a regular tune to it.

By the time we hit the Colorado River the stock was laggy. It took long hours of toil getting them down over the rimrocks. When we hit the river bottom they all settled down peaceful and went to grazing. We rested up there a couple of days.

During them days I played cowboy. We roped calves and I helped a bit with some branding. The cowboys all took the trading fever. They swapped tobacco and jack-knives, everything from horses to socks.

Next morning early the river crossing started. It was a hard job to get them old cows headed across. At last the demon called Smoky roped an old cow and plunged into the river, horse and all.

"Here's one that's damn sure going across," he bellered. The rest of the herd saw one go and followed. Smoky got on the other side wet to the ears. How he did cuss!

Then come the crossing of the pack outfits. They was more trouble. The river widened out of a narrow gorge at the crossing. She ran awful swift. That drifted the stock down towards a small strip of quicksand on the other side. Some of the stock bogged down and wallered around, scarcely making it out. Driving those packs was more possible than trying to lead them. A lot of ropes and things won't work in swift water. The horses get their feet tangled in them and drown. A couple of them drifted downstream. They turned over and over, wetting their packs. When they struck that streak of sand, it wasn't no fun. They had to be roped and drug out.

We started across. The old man hollered, "Hold on a minute." He come back to where we was. Headlight had his feet in the water.

"Sonny, do you think you can make that all right?" Dad asked.

"Hell, yes!" At that I and old Headlight plunged in. The old man hollered after us, "Don't git dizzy lookin' at the water and fall in!" Headlight swum that stream like a devilfish.

The old man tied a handkerchief around Brother's eyes, told him to hold fast to the horn and just set there, like he was to sleep and he'd get across all right. He done the same with Sister. He started Mother across and fell in behind her. I watched the proceeding pretty close. Brother must have been pretty scart. Say, that saddle horn of his was choked blue in the face. I'll admit I choked mine a bit too.

We all landed soaked to the ears. Dad built a fire to dry us out. We hung ourselves up in front of it with orders from Dad to pick up the tracks and come on when the wet wash was finished. The herd rolled out of sight up a dark canyon that led out southeast. We steamed for about an hour and then followed the herd.

Some few days later we rolled into the stockyards in Gallup, New Mexico. Every man was doggy and tired. Hot whisky soon wore that off. Over to the saloon they played cards. Loud curses and shots was heard all night.

Mother said, "I hated to see the end here, for I knowed what would happen. They always do that when they come to town."

I don't recall the feller's name, but one of the boys was killed during the night in the saloon. Blue John done it. Two or three of the dead feller's friends took it up, some fancy gun swinging was done, and old Blue John just dodged the graveyard. Blue John had give Coalie to me and I was glad to hear he made his git-away. The angels knowed where he headed to, but them boys claimed his share of the herd. He wouldn't be back to collect right away.

A couple of days roared on. Several other calamities happened in the family circle, but the town folks kinda let the boys do their own kissing to make up. The stock was all shipped and they was waiting for returns.

A week or so passed before the money come. When it did arrive whisky flowed in streams. In the gang who should happen on the scene but that lizard-eatin', yeller Joe Rush!

One of the outlaws was so fool drunk, he said, "I guess you've come after yer horse."

Old Joe was wise. "Nope, let's be friends, boys!"

"Friends, hell!" one roared.

The old man silenced him with his hand. Joe was working on a slick game. He acted as though he didn't hear it. Nobody never knowed just how Joe had it planned to trap the boys. His little party was broke up before it set in.

Joe roomed over to a place kept by an old lady that was a rip-snorting wampus cat. She'd cut her own grandmother's throat for a little loose change. The gang framed with her to let them know when old Joe went to sleep. One of the boys slipped in while Joe was snoring and swiped his guns. They took them to the blacksmith shop and filed their firing pins off so they wouldn't quite touch the cap. They got the old lady to slip them back into the holsters.

The next morning Joe had a dark brown taste in his disposition, and an oversized head. He crawled into the saloon and asked for a drink. The bartender poured out the drink and set it down in front of him. Smoky strode over quick and grabbed the whisky.

"What do you mean, damn you, takin' that from me?" Joe went for his guns as he spoke. They both come out swinging — click. Neither one fired.

Smoky had jerked his six-shooter. Two loud reports and the blue smoke curled up to the ceiling. The old counterfeit desperado piled up in a heap. A snarling grin come on Smoky's face. He put one foot on Joe and called for the drinks. Every man in that house drank to Smoky's good work.

I don't recollect when they buried that feller or how they did or who done it. But he moved out of sight. Headlight was mine for keeps!

The rest of that gang of his looked sheepy. One by one they took to the trail. They might have had the law behind them when they come, but it was sure in front of them and a long ways off after Joe cashed in.

The next morning wound up the scene of Smoky. I never seen him no more. He just disappeared. If he never did another good turn in his life, his slate was full enough. Joe Rush wasn't never no good to anybody, even to hisself.

Next day the old man come into the tent with a big roll of money. "I reckon you children and yer mother had better take off into civilization fer the winter."

Them words cut me like a new butcher knife. But I guessed I'd take my medicine. The old man said he'd trail Headlight and the rest of the horses back to the winter range.

I remember the parting quite plain. I don't know just how to say it, but Mother and him clung to each other quite a spell. I noticed tears in Mother's eyes.

As the train rolled away, Mother watched out the window. I can see the old man standing there yet, with his hat in his hand while the train pulled around the curve and hid the station from sight.

I didn't like the motion of that old iron galwagon as she whistled and swayed around the curves. Something heavy hung over me. I wished myself back on Headlight, riding with the old man. Had I knowed just how things was going for us, I might have jumped right there.

The tears dried out of Mother's eyes and she looked more cheerful. A smile was on her face. Something embarrassed her a little. She looked at the rough clothes we wore and then across at them dressed-up people.

I didn't like them at first sight. Whenever I swore, they all looked around. Mother tried to hush me at times, but I went on raving about the trails and the mountains and what a damned good horse Headlight was. I don't guess but what I was always and always will be a curiosity to town folks!

Two days passed before we unloaded at a small town. Mother's folks was all there to meet us. We went up to their place and settled down.

The next morning, first thing, Grandmother set in on me. She said I was a disgrace to all civilization. I didn't thank her none for that. Between that old lady and Mother they sure did prune me up. Whenever I come to the table, my hands and face had been undressed so thoroughly with soap and water I was ashamed. They didn't leave nothing on them but the skin that wouldn't come off, and that they polished till it was wore thin.

They even made me button my collar till it near choked me and parted my hair like little Lord Fauntleroy. I was ashamed to go to bed, let alone let anybody catch me on the street. I did my best to take the shine off this polish with my pet cuss words. Somehow I figured they would save me from complete disgrace. But how I did miss my old clothes and the sand in my toes and my rope and Headlight!

Them people around there sure was sanctimonious. I got prayers and Bibles for dinner, supper and breakfast and a little bit on toast between meals. I'd go to sleep kneeling down at a chair listening to some of them old brethren talking to the Lord and thanking Him for what they was about to git. Now this old thanking for what you ain't got or what you've already earned didn't look very reasonable to me. Nevertheless, that hummed in my ears for about a year.

All the time I remember hearing that Grandmother quacking in Mother's ears.

"I'd be doggoned if I'd live with a man that was out in the Styx and didn't dare come to town."

For a long time Mother said she married the old man cause she loved him and aimed to stick with him through thick and thin. But little by little, I could see Mother give over.

Of course, all the rest of the family, too, was boring at her about the old man. It made my blood boil. I felt like I wanted to chase Injins right over their chins. I got my ears slapped a few times for telling them that I reckoned my old man had more guts than all of them and they didn't dare to tell him to his face all their lies. I finally let up when I saw Mother was worried and getting quiet like. She'd stand for hours at the window looking in the direction of the sand.

One day a rider rode up. Mother recognized him on first sight. He lifted his hat.

"Lady, I got a note here fer yer."

The letter was dirty and worn, showing it had been carried for many days. Mother tore it open. The tears come to her eyes. By that time I was standing clost to her side.

She said, "Children, here's a letter from yer Dad!"

He told about how he missed us and things was going tough on the range that winter. Many of the horses had been bogged down in the quicksand and drowned. Headlight happened to be in the bunch of missing. At that

I burst into tears and run for the house. All my dreams had vanished of how I'd rope cattle and chase Injins.

Mother read a little more of the letter to the other children and then stopped. What the rest was I never learned. She come back in the house and set for many hours. The rider told her she could answer that letter by a man named Stuart who'd be going out that way in a few days.

I noticed that night at supper when Grandmother started in that old line, Mother fell with her. Grandmother looked surprised. Then how she did carry on! Finally, I got tired of hearing them curse my old man and sauntered off to bed.

Well, that man Stuart come in a few days. Mother sent a message to Dad. When that letter had had time enough to reach him and for him to come in, he was there! I saw him ride up and run to meet him before the rest of the family got halfway.

He picked me up in his arms. "Sonny, I ain't got much time to stay!"

I noticed the greeting between him and Mother was rather cool, although they did embrace one another. Their eyes met in funny glances.

"Kin I go back with you, Dad?"

"No, I can't take you, Boy. I'd like to! Your old Dad's had lots of trouble since you been gone and none of you around to cheer him up. I guess I've gone the limit sometimes. But to receive a letter like the one I got. . . ."

Well, we strolled into the house. He held me on his knees most of the time. Brother and Sister hung close around him all the while. They loved the old man as much as I did, I reckon, only in a different way.

That night after I was in bed, I heard hot words between Mother and Dad. Mother spoke sharply once.

"Pat, it's time to quit . . . I'm not going to have these children foller yer line."

Dad didn't answer.

"You either come in, or it's good-by. . . . I didn't know yer line when I married you. I don't know it all now, but your children ain't goin' to know anything about it from now on. The baby is worse than the others. I can't do anything with him. Man, he's the dead image of you in action!"

The old man spoke up. "Thank God for that. And you won't never be able to beat it out of him, neither!"

There was some talking I couldn't hear. Then a spell of silence. Then footsteps on the front porch. The old man dashed out the back door.

As he passed me, I caught my breath and thought, "Will I ever see him again?" I dassant call to him. I knowed better than that. But how many times, then and after, I wished I had follered him and jumped on behind his horse and rode away!

Two shots rung out from the porch. They was answered from the hitch rack. Then I heard the hoof beats of a horse on the road that soon pounded away. I had always hated that sound. I guess that's the saddest sound I ever heard in my life, that night!

Way late I listened for them to come back!

CHAPTER VI · MY FIRST JOB

That was the end for me of what most folks call their childhood, I reckon. I wasn't never peaceful again. Every day I walked with my face to the west and longed for the sand and rim rocks, black cedars, wild Indians and grim-faced men. Each day this longing growed stronger and stronger until about a year slipped by.

Mother continued to live with her folks. I hated the small house and the prayers and the chew-chaw of Grandmother. Whenever I broke into a conversation about Dad or horses or sand or Injins or Smoky or Roxie or Headlight, Mother would give me a hard look and tell me to shut up.

Now that her family had messed things up and broke up a real love and took us out of real living and Mother had to go out to work to keep us going, they lost some of their shine on her. They was mean at times!

I become sick and worried from watching Mother work hard all day then come home and tend us kids at night. At times I felt sorry for her. She become pale and thin.

I commenced to hate Dad too, for going off that way without her. I wished he'd pack her back to the mountains with him. She was always laughing and jolly, no matter how bad times was, when she was with him. This cut my hankering for the old man down a bit, but that hankering for the mountains held to me. In my dreams I saw long strings of cattle and pack horses and now and then a hungry coyote loping over the hills.

As I look back I wonder just what I do belong to. I sure didn't have no family love for my Mother's tribe. The old man had give me something, but I belonged to something else that was different from both of these.

By this time I ditched up into school a little ways. There's a lot of dictionaries I never swallered and I'd have to go to school a long while before I could translate this yarn into the English language. I quituated off the flyleaf of the primer but I hain't quit learning yet!

That town was a small place and quiet. Them people was so doggone slow they didn't know the Civil War was over. It seemed to me many of them suffered with the blues. There was a frozen frown on every face I ever lamped in that town. They went to bed with the chickens and got up with them, except a few old fellers who stayed up for a little night work. I hung around this prayer shop about two years. One day an old feller rode up to the house and said, "Boy, how would you like a little job?"

He was about halfways between these Bible-eaters and the kind of men I'd been raised with. That made him half all right and half wrong. I asked him what his job was and he told me herding cows out in the foothills. He said he'd give me my clothes and board and twenty-five cents a day. Then I called Mother. She come over, and the man introduced himself as Robbins. They talked the thing over and Mother agreed for me to go.

The old man took a liking to me right off the reel. I'd only been there a short while when a son of his gave me a horse if I'd herd his cows a month. Now the two bunches kept me busy. I was pretty near ten by this time.

What a gay life I had on that sidehill! I chased rabbits and played in the sand. Ofttimes I played I was tracking Indians through the timber. Whenever it come payday, I took the money down and give it to Mother. She dug down in an old trunk of hers and found a bridle that once belonged to her brother that was drug to death by a horse. I was proud of that! Mother seemed more than glad to have me use it.

Some time slipped by on this job. I'd heard old Robbins' boy talk about the Ute Indians west of there. I had a hankering to go and look them over.

One day when I was herding them old cows on a sidehill I got to playing outlaw up in the timber. I stayed away too long. The cows sauntered off down the valley into an alfalfa field. Two of them bloated and died. I got the rest of them out and headed them for home.

I shoved them through the first pasture bars and wheeled and took for the timber. I didn't want to go up and face old Robbins after letting them cows die. That seemed to me like the worst mistake a man could make!

When I was pretty well back in the timber, I rolled off my horse and wondered what to do. That land west of there filled with Indians and wild horses wandered into my mind. I felt sort of free and wondered why I couldn't go. The longer I thought it over, the stronger it got in my mind.

I turned to the old pony and headed towards the river. Night found me at the root of an old cottonwood tree. I hobbled the pony with one of my bridle reins and let him pick a little. Maybe I slept two or three hours during the night.

At daylight I headed towards the west. The river twisted and wound up into the foothills. Now and then cut banks caused me to take to the hills for miles before I'd get back to the river.

About noon I run on to a little bunch of Indians chasing wild horses. They was the Northern Ute Indians that had been restricted to a reservation. They was much lazier than the Southern Utes around the Robber's Roost, who to this day have never been corraled on government ground. One who spoke a little English asked me if I'd have dinner with them.

They had a stew fixed up. God only knows what was in it! I et pretty hearty, at that, for I was hungry.

One Indian tried to ask me where I was going and where

I'd come from. I acted like I didn't understand and said, "Me no savee." This amused them. They all laughed.

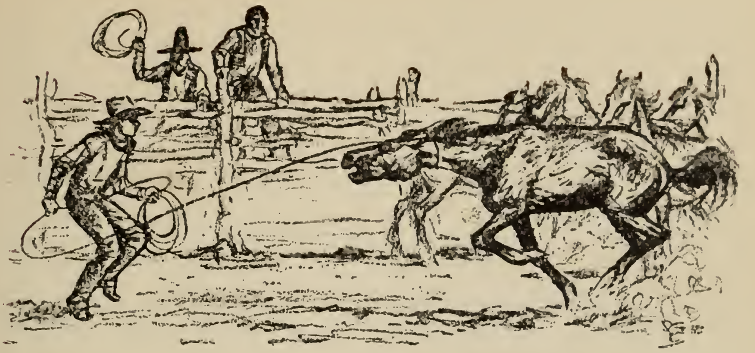
I hobbled my horse out and stuck around till night. After it had growed dark and they'd decided I wasn't going to leave, one old squaw brought me out a Navajo blanket and a tanned goat hide. I rolled up in them and soon fell off to sleep. I never felt a bit uneasy about anything, the Indians, Robbins, his two dead cows or Mother. They had to be forgot!

Next morning when I woke up, I told myself I was an Indian. One old buck noticed I had a pretty good horse. At least, I thought he did. I reckon they was short of help and wanted me to stick around.

I watched the squaws hustling to get the breakfast. They done all the camp work while the bucks set combing their hair and smoking. They set right on their one spot until their breakfast was carried to them. They all et hearty and then shoved their plates back and grunted. The squaws knowed the signal. They come and cleared away the dishes, such few as they was. Each had one coffee-cup and they et out of the frying pans. Some used butcher knives and others used their fingers. Bein' 's I'd turned out to be an Indian, I done the same.

The first thing for me to do was get next to that ungodly language of theirs. It sounded like a grunt and a groan. It ain't exactly a language, it's just a rigamarole. Part of it's done with the mouth and the other two parts with the shaking of the head and hands. To watch them sometimes you'd think they was trying to fly.

They set quiet till their breakfast went to the bottom. Then a hurried step was made towards the chase. Some rode saddles, others was bareback. The Indians rode side by side, and had long conversations. I couldn't understand a single word, but I gathered from the glances they throwed me they was satisfied. I was riding a saddle Mother Nature give me, but I was an Injin, by hunk!



CHAPTER VII · MY FIRST CHASE

Probably fifteen Indians went on the chase. All the squaws stayed in camp. That didn't seem unusual to me. They was too fat to do anything outside of waller around camp.

The country was heavily timbered with scrub cedars and pinons. It was broken with small openings covered with rabbit brush and sage. What I want to make you see is the long, gradual slope of that country as it lifted towards the south. It started down by the river and rose for about sixty miles, almost to timber line.

Wild horses and deer darted through the timber. Now and then you'd get a glimpse of a wolf. Some cougars roamed that part of the country. They lived mostly on wild horses. That didn't make the horses any tamer.

We was about fifteen miles from camp when we rode on to an old round corral that had been built to catch wild horses. It had been there many years from its tumbledown looks. It covered about one fourth of an acre. A long wing stretched out from each side of the gate. One ran about three miles to the northeast, and the other about half that far to the northwest.

The corral was built of long smooth poles on the inside. Cedar limbs and brush was piled against the outside. The wings was built more careless, of logs thrown together.

Some of the bucks had axes on their horses and started action on that corral. One old Indian walked up, handed me his ax and made the motion of chopping brush. I made the same motions and handed the ax back. The old devil grinned and said, "Ungh!" He gathered I didn't figure on working. Sure enough I didn't.

Later, when quite a bit of timber was felled, I got busy arranging it around the corral, chinking up holes and gaps. When they had piled up enough brush the Indians come to the corral. They liked the way I'd hemmed it up. They pointed here and there in the direction of my work, then commenced to carry the brush over where it was handy for me. I felt like the construction engineer. It pleased me and I worked like the devil. From that day on all the corral building was left to me.

The sun was two hours high when we started the chase. The red devils had the horses spotted. They rode off in a bunch, motioning for me to foller. About a mile from the corral one took me to a high knoll and motioned for me to stay. He made signs with his hands, showing the horses would come from the left and go towards the corral to the right. I gathered what he meant. I'd seen some of this work done.

The last run was meant for me. I was to crowd the horses into the corral and close the gate. That job required speed and action. I couldn't figure out why I drawed that deal!

It was three quarters of an hour before I heard the whoop of Indians in the distance, the reports of revolvers and the rumbling pound of the horses' hoofs coming in my direction. What a wild charge that was!

Every nerve in my body was on edge. My hair and the tips of my fingers was tingling. My blood hollered, "Hurry up! Hurry up! Hurry up!" That sure was some wild five minutes, with the roaring of six-shooters, the howl of Indians, the cracking of timber and the pounding of hoofs drawing closer and closer.

I saw red with the wildness of it. This was my chance! If I charged one minute too soon, or lagged even a second, the herd would be off for the free country again. There was some twenty-six or seven in the bunch coming towards me.

When they had passed and was a little bit to the right of me I charged my old pony and fell straight in line behind. They seen me and swung to the right. I dashed through a clump of cedars and cut them off again. They whirled, and they made straight for the corral!

My heart beat hard. My hair pulled. I whipped on. The long wings of the corral seemed to draw closer together as I rode into them. The horses shot into the corral and way to the far side, where they piled up in bunches when they hit the fence. I rolled off, jerked up the canvas gate and slipped the bars into place behind it.

One old Indian rode up and grunted, "Ungh! Heap savee, white boy!"

One by one the Indians follered. Their horses was lathered and blowing. Some trembled and pretty near fell to the ground. This was the first time I'd seen horses abused that way.

I looked at them red devils lounging on the ground, still half out of breath, trying to talk. Some had lost their hats and tore their clothes. There was something about that minute that put a thrill in it. I was part of it! It was wild, savage, with the trapped horses plunging around, hitting the fence and squealing for the freedom they had lost. I didn't feel sorry for them. I figured they'd had a wild, free, easy life. Now it was time for them to do something. Everything in this world had to do something!

I crawled up on the fence and looked them over. One gray horse in that bunch caught my eye. He was about the color of a gray wolf. His tail drug the ground, and his mane hung to his knees. I thought, "If I could only have that horse, I'd be satisfied!"

The Indians loosened their ropes and come to the corral. One old Indian called Bird handed me his rope and pointed to the bunch. I gathered from that it meant, "Take your pick." I was about one minute slapping it on that gray horse. The Indians all yelled, "Heap savee!"

Six or seven of them rushed over and grabbed the rope.

Soon the gray choked and fell. Two piled on his head. Others tied his feet. By the time he come out of the choking spell, he was well tied.

I built a hackamore of my rope. Then we let him up. Two other Indians got hold of the rope with me. We wallered around the corral. We was busy, I tell you! He put up a wicked fight. He bit and struck at the rope, reared up on his hind feet and fell over backwards several times. We kept hanging to him. Soon he was in a white-hot lather. We jerked and yanked him about the corral until he quietened down a little.

Finally, all the Indians got the rope and we led him out of the corral. We tied him to a cedar. It was getting on towards sundown by this time. The Indians tied the bars of the corral solid with a rope. Every one mounted his horse and started towards camp.

It was only a short ride going back. I was filled with dreams about that gray horse. When we rode in sight of camp the fires was all burning bright. The squaws was hustling about. Every buck in the bunch let out a loud quick yell that rung up into the skies like victory. Them that was left in camp understood that yell. They answered us with one just like it.

Old Bird was the chief of that bunch. He loaded a plate heavy with fresh fried meat that tasted like venison to me and two or three thin cooked scones of bread.

After supper was et they gathered in bunches about the fires. Many times some of the Indians would point at me with a grin on their faces and say, "Mericats appets heap savee!" I learned this meant, "American boy sure understands a lot."

At bedtime my same blankets was issued to me, with one more dirty robe added. I sure did pound my ear that night. I overslept the next morning. The first thing I knowed one of the old squaws was tapping gently on my hand with a small cottonwood limb. She smiled. It seemed to me she was trying to ask me if I was sick. I shook my head and jumped out of bed.

In that game, you didn't have to worry about dressing and undressing. A man never took his clothes off until they wore off. Baths was further apart than Halley's comet and the moon.

After breakfast we headed up the ridge for the corral. I rode in the lead all the way, for I was anxious to get another squint at that gray horse. When we reached the corral the horses whistled, snorted and commenced to mill around.

The gray horse seen us. He hung back from the cedar tree several times. He would hang back till he fell down. Then he'd dash headlong into the tree, skinning up his head. He abused himself shameful! The Indians went into the corral and commenced to rope the other horses.

I made up my mind to tame that gray devil. Several times I snuk up close to him. He'd whistle and snort, stick his head towards me and then jump away. A couple of hours rolled by before he permitted me to put my hand on his shoulder. I petted him that way for quite a while, each time covering more of his body with the stroke of my hand. He growed quiet and seemed to like it.

By then the Indians had all the horses roped. They had tied up the front foot of each and turned the horses loose again. That's the way they generally handle them after they let them out of the corral. They'd tie the rope tight around the ankle, then hitch it to the big muscle of the leg and hold it that-away. This would let the horse go on a three-legged jump until it got weary and stopped. Some would travel about a mile, others two or three. When they give up, the Indian would ride up and cut the rope. That took all the run and fight out of them.

Old Bird come out and helped me tie up the gray's foot. We throwed him in the bunch. I reckon he traveled about two miles and a half. Then he stopped and throwed up his head. I rode up and cut the rope as I'd seen the rest of them do. He fell into the bunch. Soon we had them on the river bottom in a tight pasture. We closed the bars on them and went to camp.

All the rest of the day we laid around in the shade. I drawed close to the bunch of Indians and listened to their conversation. Some of that gibber sounded like geese squawking and the rest like you was gargling your throat with hot mush.

One corner of that pasture had a big corral in it. Next day we corraled the horses and the breaking started. They left me alone with my old gray plug. When I slapped my rope on him he laid his ears back, opened his mouth and made straight for me.

Now, I went to the top of that fence in nothin' flat! One of the Utes hollered, "Sanop" which means Wolf in Indian. Right there my horse got that name plastered on him for life. Wolf! He had the color of a gray wolf and the disposition of four of them.

I reached through the fence for the end of the rope. I snubbed him close to the bottom of a post, tied him solid and then went in and got a saddle blanket. I fanned him with it till he quit. Maybe you don't think fanning them with a blanket will take the bear out of them! That's one of the quickest ways in the world to gentle a horse.

Then I took my rope and made a sort of collar round his neck. I put it around his hind leg, drawed it up towards his shoulder and tied it. After that I loosened the snub rope from the fence, letting his head go free. I give him another application of the saddle blanket. He flounced and fell down a few times and then got up, shook his head and whistled.

I walked up and petted him on the head. An Indian hollered "Appets heap savee, poke manitch." (Boy understands horse work.)

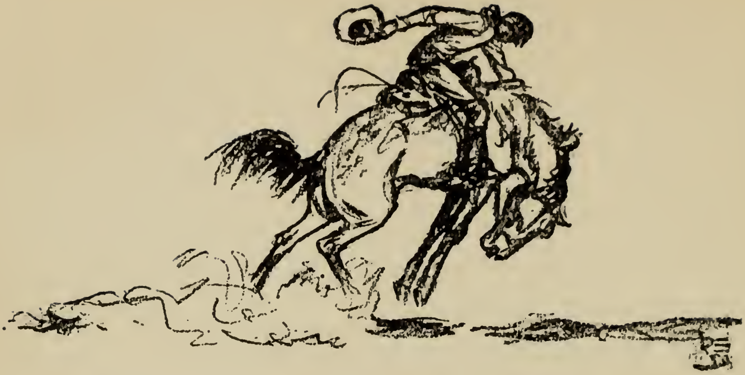
Next I had to get him to lead. I took hold of the hackamore rope and pulled his head towards me several times, walking from one side to the other. After he found I loosened the rope binding his jaw each time he turned his head towards me, he followed me freely with his head. He saw I didn't aim to hurt him. Kindness will win a horse quicker than anything.

Then I let his foot free. I begun to walk around and around him, tightening the rope on his jaw a little each time he didn't come. Soon he was follering me in a circle. Each time he would take a step towards me I loosened the rope. If the rope is put on right, it is pretty severe punishment when a horse hangs back on it. He soon finds out when he comes ahead the punishment stops. He begun to advance a step or two towards me. At that I loosened the rope and petted his head for a long while. Time and again I done that, till once when I stepped back he follered me without tightening the rope. He walked up and put his nose right on me. Several times I done this, petting him gently each time he advanced. Finally, I turned and walked away. He follered me. When I stopped, his nose was on my shoulder.

You ought to heard them crazy savages yell! They was superstitious. They thought I could talk the horse language. They sure looked at me!

"Maybe big horse spirit, ungh!" one Indian cried in half Indian and half English.

I grasped this meaning in a minute. I'd often heard Dad tell about how you could work on an Indian's superstition. I knowed an Indian could be afraid of you and yet be a good friend. From now on that would be my lead!



CHAPTER VIII · WOLF OR ME

These days I was happy and whistled and sung all the while. Once in a while I thought of home, but not very serious. I always did feel like the black sheep of the family, and I didn't reckon as how they'd miss me much. Even if they did, I couldn't help that! It would be easier on Mother to support two children than three. I never once dreamed they'd be hunting a runt like me. In later years I found out they did. They searched the whole country but nobody had seen me pull west towards the Indians.

Them Indians wasn't running to the whites with any of their troubles and they never mentioned about my being there. I stayed out of town! Whenever a white man pulled my direction, I'd take to the rocks or tall timber. Them red devils was wise enough to help me keep under cover.

Then come the day for riding old Wolf. I figured maybe the job was too big for me, but I wouldn't let the Indians know that. I played as though I'd broke a thousand head. I finally got a saddle on him. I rode around the corral awhile. Then I made signs to the Indians to let down the bars.

Old Bird shook his head. "Maybe horse kill 'em boy."

"Open them bars, you lazy lizard. I know what I'm doin'!"

They all laughed and let down the bars. One Indian hollered, "Sooch Oggit," which means wild. Right there I packed that name.

Well, that gray devil whirled and twisted and then took off into the timber! He made a few wicked jumps that made me hang to the leather. When he didn't lose me, he throwed his head into the air and took to the mountains. As he mounted the ridge about half a mile away, I looked back. A string of Indians was coming as hard as they could ride. Boy! The chase was a hard one. Wolf was leading them Indians like an antelope would a hog. He run through heavy patches of timber and scratched my face and hands. My hat was gone and my shirt was tore off my back, my face was bleeding, my arms tired and cramped from pulling on the iron jaw.

Oh, that greyhound could run! He growed stronger and more powerful every jump. Again and again he run through heavy bunches of timber. I managed to duck and dodge the heavy limbs but the others beat me over the hands and face. Finally, he come out into the open and run towards the upper valley that was full of canyons and washes.

I looked ahead! He was running straight towards a deep wash. I knowed this wash was fifteen feet deep and nigh onto ten feet wide. I held my breath a little and gripped the saddle. Wild life was what I wanted and I guessed I was gitting it! The sweetness faded out just at that moment. Say, he cleared that wash and had quite a bit to the good. My courage raised a little. What a horse he'd be, if I ever tamed him!

He whistled and looked back at the coming Indians three quarters of a mile in the rear. He snorted, made two short jumps, whirled, and was off again like a flash of lightning. He made a big circle round to the left and come back right near the wash again. By then the Indians was close at hand.

He whistled and was off again like a scart wolf! He made straight for another ledge. This was a different proposition. There was a creek down to the bottom. The ledge was probably about seventy-five feet high. As he made for it I heard a cry come from the Indians.

I felt myself grow cold. This was no time to weaken if I aimed to save my hide. I kept jerking on my right rein. We run down a little dip out of the Indians' sight. It was a slight slope before you hit the ledge. It was covered with heavy piñons.

When he come within about twenty feet of the ledge I closed my eyes. There was a sudden stop and a pile-up. One of the heavy branches on a pine tree hooked my hackamore nosepiece and turned him around. He was just six feet this side of a long sound sleep! This happened just under the rim out of sight of the Indians. They'd lost territory by that time, for they had to ride around the wash we jumped.

Wolf didn't hesitate one moment getting on his feet again. He headed straight for the creek, on a dead run with a seventy-five foot drop to the off side of his hoofs. When he hit the creek he follered it a few steps then jumped and made up the other side.

By the time the Indians reached the spot where they expected to look down and find us heaped up, old Wolf was mounting the top on the other side. I hung to him like grim death to a porcupine.

Loud yells and cries rang out when they saw I wasn't killed. They don't know to this day but what we really did go off. They was too excited to take time to look for tracks.

The chase went on. They whirled their horses and follered up the country to get around the ledge by the upper way. I soon lost them again. Wolf run many miles to the south, then circled and come back. Animals travel in a circle sooner or later, when they are frightened.

Finally he broke into a trot. Still I couldn't stop him. A long time he trotted on. Seemed to me he never would stop. All the while I was working at the bridle reins, first one side and then the other. I fanned him over the head with my hackamore rope. I'd fan him with one hand and pull on the other bridle rein and then change. At last, I got him where I could steer him a little.

I heard the yells of the Indians. They gathered from every direction. They rode up alongside of me and looked. We was headed for camp.

Old Bird said, "Maybe sick boy, eh?"

I shook my head. That was sure the biggest lie I ever told! Every nerve in my body had gone its limit. If I was only to camp!

When we reached camp they turned their horses loose. I tied Wolf to a tree. I thought I would starve some of that Wolf out of him. I went and laid down on my dirty blankets.

One old squaw brought me a plate of supper. I minced away on some of it, then dug a hole and buried the rest. Their "heap big horse spirit" was busy with matters of spiritual congestion. It was located in the region of my middle. Eating had suddenly growed unnecessary. "Shut-eye" was what I needed!

When I woke in the morning the sun was high. All the bucks was over in the pasture working on their horses. The squaws moved lazy about the camp. When they discovered I was awake, one motioned me to come over. She saved some breakfast. I felt like I was walking on half of myself that was left behind! I set down and munched away at their dirty grub.

I tucked most of it out of sight, then got up and took a look at Wolf. He looked like he'd been badly stayed with. He still had enough hunch in him to whistle at me. I said, "Unh-hu! baby. You'll be mine or I'll be yours!" Words to that effect.

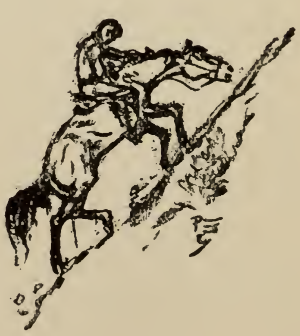
Late that afternoon I saddled him. One Indian insisted that he lead him a ways on his horse. Some way or other this suited me, though I sure made a loud protest. He took the rope and I mounted the gray devil.

Wolf made a couple of awkward jumps and then throwed up his head and trotted beside the other horse. We went about half a mile. I reached over, took the rope from the Indian and said, "My picks 'em now!"

Wolf looked the situation over and I guess decided we'd stick together peaceable that day and ever after. He trotted along quiet. He seemed to get a thrill out of his new station in life. I believe the "spirit stuff" got under his hide.

He would dance and prance me around in front of them red devils whenever he got the chance. His long white tail and mane waving in the air must have made a bit of good scenery for sore eyes. The Indians would watch us, grunt their approval, then watch some more!

They made me pay for my high jinks. They handed me all the hard runs over rough dangerous country that come in their chases.



CHAPTER IX · SPOOKING THE INDIANS

I'm going to skip about three years that I spent with the Indians. That's when I was growing up and learning things. I spent many days and nights in the hills alone, watching wild animals and learning their nature. I centered mostly on wild horses, animals in the wolf family and such birds as eagles, crows and owls. I didn't require much sleep in them days, so often night time found me riding.

I spent many hours playing pranks on the Indians. I found their own medicine was the hardest for them to eat. You've heard this old stuff about the Indians being so keen of eye, good at tracking and riding. Give a white man two thirds of the practice an Indian has, and he will beat him at any game.

There is many ways an Indian's superstition holds him back. I learned they watched me close on all my skulking trips, especially night rides. I tracked and hunted alongside of many of them. If I do say so, that Indian never lived could beat me! They kinda leaned on me when it came to hard jobs.

When I returned from a long trip they waited to hear what I might tell them of some strange experience. Now, if they had much themselves, they wouldn't be looking to a thirteen-year-old boy to learn them anything!

An Indian is afraid to ride after dark unless it is a case of emergency. He has idees and they play tricks on him. Therefore anybody riding after dark is held in their mind as a spook.

They imagined I could see twice the distance of any Indian by daylight. They thought I seen at night as well as in the day, for I'd found horses and things in the dark they wouldn't have looked for.

I would stage little rampages at night to spook them. I'd ride away in one direction, come back from another. I would hide game in the daytime, ride out at night and bring it in, never letting them know but what I had got it in the dark. These tricks are so simple it's silly to talk about them. All the same they worked! For these funny carryings on, they called me Mopitz the Owl. That's the name they know me by to-day.

I growed tired laying around their dirty camps at night. I never stayed unless something special was on. I'd saunter off to a high knoll and set down. I'd listen to the nightbirds and the song of the coyote.

When a coyote howled in close range, I'd answer him back. Sometimes a curious one would answer me. I would chant with him for hours. It got rumored among the Indians I could talk the language of the coyote. They call him the Big Spirit's dog and are more or less frightened of him. An Indian wouldn't kill a coyote under no circumstances.

A snake they held as a devil spirit. Some of them believed the bad Indians turned to snakes after they died and returned to earth. I used to gather up the harmless species and bring them into camp in my hands and pockets. I would set down in the middle of them and let one crawl out of my pocket. They'd all yell and scatter.

With all these things I kept my distance. No Indian would harm me. He thought I might call on the spirit belonging to these animals and he'd be cursed in some way.

It's an old trick of an Indian to slip up quietly behind you and stand and watch you. I found out I could play that on them as well as they could on me. I'd slip up to them while they was setting in their camp, fold my arms and listen to their conversation, always holding a smile on my face. When the Indians would spot me standing there smiling, they wouldn't like it. They would say, "Mopitz all same." They would huddle into conversation among themselves. By this time I could understand every word they said.

At times they called me the Big Medicine Man. To live up to this name I pulled as many sleight-of-hand tricks as I could work out. I knowed some card tricks. They thought I could see through the cards. Indians run pretty heavy to gambling. By these tricks I held to my own way among the Indians. They give me the same place of honor they give all their spooks and I come and went as I pleased.

That summer about one hundred and twenty Indians pulled into the high range to chase wild horses. It was a rough country and sloped off to the north. There was patches of thick timber with much underbrush and fallen logs. Narrow valleys run north and south, full of blue grass and black sage. These open valleys with patches of timber made it difficult to chase horses.

This country wasn't a pleasant-feeling place by any means. A heavy blue haze hung over it. The sun never did seem to shine straight down. Here and there was rough, narrow canyons. Small ledges about twenty to thirty feet high hemmed them on both sides. A few places the trails crossed. That helped us out when making a run to the corral; or if a man had a special horse he wanted to rope, he could lay near a trail and catch him.

There was a pinto mare in the bunch I wanted. She was a notorious runner and had been chased by Indians and white men from all directions. That running old heifer was half white and half black. Her front part was white to her front legs. Her hind part black as an Indian's hair.

The Indians went down the country and relayed her to me. I was the fifth buck to fly at her. She come within two rope lengths of me. I started with my rope whirling high over my head. I was on as good a horse as ever et sagebrush, but she throwed up her tail and showed me a clean git-away. In half a mile she had gained three rope lengths. I had an idee I might outrun her before we started, but I changed my mind!

She made straight through heavy timber. That meant my rope was no good. She ducked and dodged the cedars like a tomcat working through a woodpile. We come out of this on a ledge about fifteen feet high. When I seen it, it was too late to stop. We all piled up in the bottom. The horses got up unhurt. I didn't remember any more of that chase.

Several days later I come to in the old Medicine Man's teepee. The Indians was making medicine over me. I can remember the sound of their droning song. Old Medicine Man was butting and rooting me around the tent with his head, without any mercy for my sore spots. He found a new one every minute. He would break his song to squirt water on me out of his mouth. Then he'd wave his hands like a raving maniac.

All the Indians that could pack into the teepee was chanting a medicine song. They sang in a low, even tone. For days this kept up. They never stopped. I lay on some blankets at one end of the tent. They had taken off every dud I had on me, put a black band around my head and placed one white feather in it. The white feather marks the sick man. They need something like this to mark him out. They all sound sick, smell sick and look worse. They take off all your clothes so the evil spirits cannot hide in them and hover over your body. A man would sure crowd himself to get well and get out of a hubbub like that!

I growed stronger, but the medicine business still kept on. Their method is not to leave a man alone until he is able to walk. My delirium was caused more from their singing than anything else. I would doze off to sleep to this, "Hai-yai-yi and hum-um-um" and dream I was in the Happy Hunting Ground, riding fast horses where game and water was plentiful and a pinto mare et out of my hand. Always a great white eagle soared over me, throwing me good luck.

Few white men is ever sung to by the Indians. This Medicine Man was as much interested in my cure as I was myself. My interest was self-defense, his was self-preservation. His reputation hung on my cure. If a Medicine Man loses one case they think his medicine is a little weak. If he loses the second, it's a little weaker. If he loses three straight hand-running, he is doomed to death and is killed by the Indians. I don't know how many others this Medicine Man had failed on but I was sure one that got well!

He shouldered the honors and strutted them around camp. To keep up the Indian tradition I had to present the old hubbub with two horses. I would gladly have given him ten head if he'd quit before he got started!

The squaws took a hand in this also. They brought me roots and herbs they had gathered. Sick Water! Some of them was nasty! One old squaw come to the tent door and said, "White Owl soon fly again in dark!"

This sickness drawed me closer to the Indians. It made me one of them. I had never believed in their medicine before I got well. Now their medicine and superstitious idees impressed me. I had never thought of them but to laugh and plague the Indians.

When I was a kid, I had longed for the day to come when I could bulldoze them and make them dance. Yet they'd spent days and nights making medicine over me to get me well. I had spent all this time learning their traditions and superstitions to get the upper hand on them. Now, after their kindness to me, I didn't want to use it.

I knowed I couldn't show the red man any tenderness or he'd start to bulldoze me. But I begun to wonder about their Great Spirit. He seemed a pretty good sort of a feller!

I had heard so much God-stuff that white-collared fat men reeled out of their Bibles that I was sick of it. But the Great Spirit that used the winds and storms for His fury and the sun and rain to bring food and happiness to His children was more real to me.

The Indian's faith was strong. He merely talked to the Great Spirit under the big sky. He thanked Him. He didn't shout damnations to his brothers.

In the mornings I got up and walked to the top of the hill as the other Indians done. I would stand with head thrown back, my face set to the rising sun, my arms wide stretched at my sides, with open palms to catch the first rays. I prayed each morning. I asked the Great Spirit to protect me and make me strong. I thanked Him for my rest at night. I begged for food and fat horses to be a plenty. At sunset I prayed the same. Only Indian bucks pray alone and aloud in this manner.

It's a funny thing that the squaw never prays but once in a while, only when the moon is just right. Then it is all to herself. She sits cross-legged on the ground, lays her hands crossed palms up on her lap, her head thrown back with face to the sky. She offers her silent prayer without even a twitch of the face.

I want to tell something about the way the buck goes down to the water to pray. He sits down beside it, slowly dips up a handful to his mouth, tells the Great Water Spirit his big love for Him, that he wants to keep Him from being angry that he may be allowed to use all the water he wants.

Then to the Forest God he carries his prayer. He walks into the forest with his arms folded and his head thrown back, singing a few soft words that sound like the "Woo-oo" of the wind. He thanks Him for the shelter His trees bring to the teepees, for the wood that keeps him warm where the Fire Spirit dwells. He thanks the Forest God for the game that roams the tall forest and the grass that keeps his ponies fat. He prays like this in the morning and the evening — first to the Sun, then to the Water, then to the Forest.

Besides this, there are certain times of general prayer. These are set by the moon. When the new moon rises, just before it hits the center of the sky, is the set hour for prayer.

The bucks walk silent, one by one, out of their camp, and form a congregation in the center of a flat. There they kneel, resting on their heels with their elbows on their knees. They close their hands and bring their knuckles and wrists together and place their chins on their thumbs, drawing their elbows as close as possible to their bodies. Their blankets have been thrown over their heads and hang nearly to the ground in front of them. They look like a bunch of tombstones!

They begin to murmur the low ooo-ooo-ooo of the Silent Moon prayer. It's just a hum, in their throats. It is a prayer of thanks to the Great Silent Moon Spirit that has watched over them.

They slowly rise to their feet, throw off their blankets, fold their arms and throw their heads back to the moon. Then they commence to pray aloud, each one saying his own prayer. They ask the Great Moon Spirit to shine bright and to protect them in dark nights and stormy nights when they can't see Him. The Great Moon Spirit is the silent watchman of the night. He watches their ponies and shows them where to feed. They thank Him when He is with them. They ask Him to protect them When He is gone.

At last in a louder tone in the same words all together, they ask Him to protect them from the evil spirit that travels by night and hovers outside their teepees, that he may not be allowed to crawl in among their papooses. In a long silence they stand with their backs to the moon before, one at a time, they return to their teepees.

There is a time when the moon gives a signal for merry-making, such as dancing and loving. The moon is full then and just a little past center of the sky. They will set in bunches and wait for this time to come, talking and joking.

The Indians don't face each other dancing, like white folks does. They stand beside each other, crossing hands in front of them, barn dance like. They step forward and back, singing to the beat of the tom-tom. The bucks hain't got time to dance with their own squaws when the moon's this-away. It don't happen often and they put in this time swinging the other feller's squaw. That old junk about the Indians being true to one spouse is about as true of them as it is of the White man.

This is the time when the young bucks and the maidens do a lot of buildin'. They coo about it much the same as white folks does. The young buck begins to look around for help just about the time his beard shows up. The buck never shaves. The squaw plucks his whiskers. Sometimes a heap big Injin refuses to submit. Then all the squaws in camp pile into him and hold him down until his chin is as bare as an alkali flat.

No buck had better be caught by his own squaw hugging another off in the shade some place. A squaw is the meanest thing that ever got made in this world. When she grabs up something and starts, there is no way of stopping her without killing her. It wasn't held no crime for a buck to kill his squaw if she butted in when he was trying to love a young one.

This festival, Tu Woopoggai, comes two or three times a year. It lasts only one night. The Indians go way into the night with it. After they tire of dancing, they sit and pop corn and feast till daylight. They lie around all the next day.

CHAPTER X · PIKE WAY!

It was getting along towards the drowsy season of the Indians. There was nothing to do but set in camp. That always made my feet itch. I wanted to be gittin' further.

The fall storms and rains made it too muddy to chase wild horses. The market closed. With the long winter coming on, people wouldn't buy horses. It was no use to go hunting. The big game would soon come down to feed in the lowlands out of the snow. The hard winds drove the cold into me. It was too disagreeable to skulk for signs.

Eat and sleep! That was all there was to do, with about forty black Indians in one teepee huddled around fires, talking over little silly incidents that wouldn't interest nobody. The air was so stiff and thick you could cut it with a corn razor. I was on my way!

Some drifting cow-woddies had told of a country that laid off to the south where cow-punchers run in herds. One cold morning found me packed and ready for the trail, with seven saddle horses and two pack mules. I pulled up in front of the Indian camp and hooted.

All the Indians come to their teepee doors.

"Ave pike way, Mopitz! (Where you going, Mopitz?)," rang out through the cold air in many tones.

"Navas teesup pike way! (No place, just all the time go)," I answered.

"Annoc peechee? (When you coming back?)"

"Nawoof pike way, nine peechee (When snow goes I come back)!"

But the snow left several times before my return. I waved them good-by, whirled Wolf round the pack mules and began to tell them stories.

"Git out of here, you long-eared sons of misfortune, to where, nobody knows!"

Their hoofs beat to the tune I sung, cheerfully cussing them on my way. Night found our camp on the bank of the river. It sure was cold! The stiff breeze that follered down the river made the old ponies hump up. When I broke camp the next morning every saddle and pack outfit was froze stiff. I shook myself, cussing the men that would live in a place like this. I was glad to be going some place!

Maybe you don't think it was hard to get them ponies started. They wanted to go humped up into eternity. My cussing saved them. The ice squeaked and popped as one by one I hammered them across. Their heads was on the wrong end. They wanted to go back. I jerked down my rope and commenced to pound their tail bones.

"Git out of this froze-up country. You ain't coyotes and you ain't Injins. You're cowboys, you frosty galoots!"

I climbed into a high country. The snow got deep. I follered the edge of a ridge for a long ways. Then the trail led off to the south down a hogback. When the horses started to foller it, I spurred Wolf in to head them. I was within six foot of dropping off all the way round.

Suddenly, I struck some sloping rock covered with snow. I didn't see it. Old Wolf slipped and lost his feet. Down he went on his side and slid to the edge. I struggled to free myself, but couldn't. I guess I was on the wrong balance. The saddle was froze to me. Wolf struggled again to get back on the ridge, but off he went sailing in the air.

The thought come to jump. No! I'd better stay with him! He was heavier than me and the heavy side would hit first. I gripped him and we went down. He lit on his feet. It drove his legs right up into his body. It just seemed to flatten him out. He was dead when he hit. He never made a struggle or a groan.

I struck my arm against a rock on the way down. My left arm was broke just above the wrist. Wolf had settled slightly on one of my ankles and made it swell up. I didn't feel much pain.

All my thoughts went to my horse. He was the best horse that ever carried a saddle! He'd held many an Indian spellbound as they watched him run wild horses and other wild game. He was a natural wind-splitter. I guess his day was done. Everybody's is once. Wolf must have belonged to days I wasn't to take him out of.

I was heartsick. I've often thought since if I hadn't lost Wolf my whole life might have been changed. Sometimes the smallest things in a man's life leads him another way. I didn't love nothing nor nobody, but my horse was part of me!

I looked at the ledge. It was a full thirty-five feet up. How was I going to get on top? It was at least a half mile around to get to the top. I loosened my saddle and outfit from the brave gray Wolf, tied the rope on the horn and around the rest of the trinkets and fastened a rock to the other end. I throwed the rock upon the edge of the ledge. This saved me carrying my saddle. Packing it and a broken arm all at once was too much of a load! I walked around till I got on top again.

Holding with one hand and my teeth I pulled up the outfit, laid it on the ground and set down. I tore my shirt and bandaged my arm. She was broken straight off and hung at the break like a tent flap.

Finally, I walked over and caught another horse, called Ponnasooket. It was some job saddling that black curse with one arm! He jumped like the half-witted galoot he was! I told him about it a time or two with the toe of my boot in his belly. Finally I mounted. He ducked his head and started bucking down through the cedars.

I traveled till dark. That arm ached and I swore. I built cigarettes and swore some more. Building cigarettes with one hand on a jogging horse is like trying to beat "home sweet home" on your ear drums.

When night come, I unpacked and set down. No eat 'em, no sleep. Some Indian curse was after me! I didn't do nothing to that old arm only watch it swell up. Hell come at daylight. Packing them two twisting, maggoty mules with one hand was like trying to scratch my ear with my elbow. I finally packed them. Either one of them mules could kick a chaw of tobacco out of your mouth without touching your lips.

We started, bridle reins in my teeth and my rope in my hand. I run out of Indian cuss words and begun to use English ones. There's more of them.

"Ki-swat ki-swat, shoulder your hind end, you long-eared, tail-wringin', dishfaced, hip-sweenied-magpie-gutted old squaws. Git them legs in motion. I'm in a rush for nowheres. Somebody's got to patch this arm."

We talked the whole day to keep going. Them old horses got wise to my voice. All day they stayed way out on the lead. That night I knowed better than to unpack them long-eared curses. My arm was six times its size by then. The mules stamped and wiggled all night. It was too much trouble to get a blanket. I couldn't wrap up in it nohow. I built a fire and set by it.

By morning I was too stiff to set and too tired to ride. I felt like a prisoner of emptiness, cold and pain. Not a sign of life reached my eye or ear. The cold was dogging me and my arm rode me like a monster. About nine that morning I stumbled into a ranch. Two old fossil-faced men looked my arm over.

"Pretty bad, Boy. We'll do the best we can!"

They got some boards off an old dry-goods box and whittled out some splints. They monkeyed about two hours getting it in place. I was sweating blood, but I got warm! That was something to grin about. After the patching they told me I'd better stick around till it got better. I thanked them, but dreams of a warmer climate stuck into me, I was fer gittin' further! They helped me pack my long-eared pets and get started. The arm felt better in the sling where it couldn't flap around.

That afternoon I was close to the old trail that led east of the Robber's Roost when I caught up to a feller going my direction. He had one saddle horse and a pack horse. Right there we throwed in cahoots. There was something funny about him. He wasn't easy, but kept glancing back. I wondered what he'd done, but I didn't ask.

He was different to most fellers I ever seen. He talked quite a bit. He told me his name was Jack. I didn't ask Jack what. Most of them fellers only carries one name. Two is too heavy if they're traveling fast. He was real dark-complected with big brown eyes. He had a mustache and a beard a week or two old. He was a smooth-looking guy when he was shaved up and looked like Old Nick when he wasn't.

He stood about five foot six, square shoulders and long thin arms. I judge he weighed about a hundred and forty.

He had the action of a panther — moved with a free, easy swing. He was probably forty years old.

He always handled his bridle reins light, and moved free and easy in his saddle. He looked as though he'd been born in chaps with spurs on. He proved he was a man of long hard rides. He knowed how to protect his horse. His short lariat hung on the left side of his saddle. He was a Southpaw. Them guys are generally good ropers and clever men in the stock game. You never seen a more pleasant man!

We traveled together for many days, our faces towards the South. Things run peaceable. We stayed in the rough country, away from the man-traveled trails.

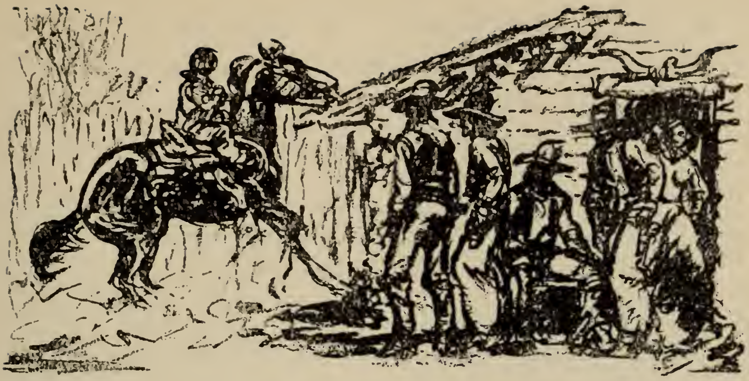
Finally we landed on the Navajo Reservation. Jack went to work for the McClain Cattle Company. It was run by a bunch of Easterners, hard put to throw money away. They knowed as much about running a cow outfit as a hog does about a hip pocket in a bathing suit. Jack hadn't been there a month before he was running the darn outfit. Now I'm telling you he run it to his advantage! Even at that, he couldn't get away from saving them money.

I went to work for an outfit named Young. They run a Navajo Trading Store along with five hundred cows and a swack of bad horses. I got forty a month and my keep. Young kept his mouth shut on any promoting I did on the outside. This amounted to some few trifles before I finished.

That country around there would get a man's goatee.

A long sandy draw about three miles wide run through it, with purple and blue badlands on both sides. Off to the west was the Navajo Mountains, rough and heavily timbered. A blue haze always hung over them. Far east was the La Plata Mountains. They was snow-peaked the year round. Some few miles south rolled the sand-dune country, blotted with small patches of timber.

This country was full of thieving Navajos. Some few white men had throwed in with them, because the game was easy and the stakes high. All this made the country hellish, hot and interesting for a man who wasn't looking for more than gay competition in the game of chance. That country was many miles from civilization. The freshness of it held me.



CHAPTER XI · BAY, THE STALLION

I and old Cheekoe breezed out one day to look over a bunch of cows that run down Oehoalomo Draw. As I swung down out of the badlands and hit the rim at the head of the draw a bunch of Navajo horses ran in front of me. A bay stallion in that outfit took my eye. He showed signs of good breeding — had every point of a powerful, fast horse. Danged if he wasn't a beaut! My hand itched for my rope. My rope itched for that old pony. He growed and growed in my estimation. Well, I knowed it wouldn't do to high-grade him right now. I rode into camp.

That night the stars seen me riding towards McClain's cattle outfit. I wanted to tell Jack about the stallion and see if he knowed of any place I could deliver him.

Jack knowed the horse. He told me the Navajos had paid an awful price for him — something like two thousand dollars in horses, cattle and goats.

"Well," I said, "there's nothin' too good for the Irish. I don't owe them Navajos fer anythin' but trouble. I'll jest do a little collectin' if I can place him somewhere."

Jack told me of a friend living on the Dolores River. He said he raised good horses, and would give me five hundred dollars, at least, for that horse and ask no questions.

I got the feller's name and where he lived. It would take three nights of hard riding to get Bay there. It was a good two hundred miles. A part of it was country the Indians didn't like. The cow-punchers and rustlers was a little rough on them.

The next morning when I arrived in camp, I told old Young I guessed I'd have to have about five days off. He said all right. Sometime in the afternoon, I mosied out of camp, riding old Cheekoe. I knowed if I could get a short run at Bay I could rope him. Between sundown and dark, that's what happened.

After I got a hackamore built on him, I took off through the badlands. I headed north towards Farmington, seventy miles away. A friend of mine lived a little this side of it. The crack of daylight found me with him. I laid around all day, left Cheekoe in his care, and took off on Bay.

It was dark again when we made for the San Juan River. There'd been a lot of storms up at the head of the river. She was boiling full to the brim with flood water and quicksand waves. Heavy drift logs and brush rolled down. The bay stallion snorted many times. All horses is scart of flood water.

I rode down by the old ford. Against my luck, there was a bunch of Navajos camped there. I kept back in the shade of the heavy cottonwoods.

One Navajo was close enough to ask, "You go cross?"

"Yep!"

"Maybe you drown. Navajo no cross, too much water. . . . What cher name?"

"Hatch."

That was the sheriff's name. I thought maybe he wouldn't pry into my business any more. Most Navajos stays away from the sheriff.

I spurred Bay down to the water. He snorted and plunged and reared to get away. I dug him in the ribs and laced him over both sides with my quirt. The punishment got too hot. He made a bolt into the water.

Ten steps and we went out of sight. We both come up blowing water. About that time a wave of water and sand covered us up. A drift log hit the bay's front feet. It turned him top side down. I gripped the saddle and held tight. As he come up swimming, I reached over and stripped off my bridle to give him all the advantage. A small log poked me in the ribs as it passed. I was trying to get my breath when another sand wave covered us. I must have sucked in about ten gallon of water that time. That old horse was swimming like a machine.

He touched the bank on the other side. I said, "Old Bay, that's two fools that's been saved. They won't do it again!"

We sucked in a little air and got straightened up. I made a mad run to get under cover from the Indians. Some of them was too interested by this time.

I rode hard until daylight, and then I found a pocket in a draw, where the grass was tall and the browse was good. I hobbled Bay and watched him till he was full. Then I went to sleep to wait until dark. We'd covered better than a hundred and forty miles.

That evening when it got cool we started on. Daylight brought us to the Dolores River. I was getting hungry. All I'd had was a few biscuits and some jerked beef I throwed in my saddle bags at the ranch near Farmington.

It was good sun-up when I lamped the ranch described to me by Jack. As I rode into the yards, I got the once over by a long, keen cowboy. Right there I took him to be the hawkeye of that outfit. I asked him if this man Jones was home. He said Jones was in the house eating breakfast and would soon be out. He told me I'd better roll off and feed my old pony. He'd go up and see if the cook would fix me a snack of breakfast.

About that time, Jones rolled out, looked at me and called, "Hello, stranger!"

I told him I was a pal of Jack's, the boy that had had the trouble with the butcher here a few years ago.

"Well, if he sent you here, I know yer all right. If you've got anything on yer chest, jest uncoil it."

I called him over to one side, said I had a danged good stallion to sell him. He mustn't ask for any bill of sale, or for the papers on him. I hadn't been able to steal them. He went in and looked the Bay over and led him outside.

"He sure is some good-looker, jest what I need in my game."

He asked me how far I'd brought him. I told him far enough.

"All right! What's yer price on him?"

"What'll you give?"

"Five hundred."

"You give me five hundred and deliver me to the railroad under cover and he's yours."

After I'd had breakfast, we got in his old jitney and pulled down all the curtains. Jitneys was scarce them days. He drove ten miles to the town bank where he drawed the five hundred. He handed it to me.

"Here you are, boy."

We shook hands to tie the deal.

Soon I was on the station platform, waiting for the old iron tramp wagon. I rode it back to Farmington, stepped off the train the opposite side from the depot and took off down through the brush to the river.

There I laid till night. I stole the ferryboat and took it across, turned it loose and bid Farmington "auree hoots." I had about three miles to walk and carry my outfit before I was in the ranch corral and had it on Cheekoe. I went whistling down the road.

We was within fifteen mile of Young's ranch by daylight. There I laid till the sun was well up. If I met any of the Navajos they'd think I had rode out from the ranch that morning. Young knowed enough not to give me away. If they asked questions, he'd stall them off.

I fell asleep. It was late in the forenoon before I struck the ranch. Young never asked any questions. Just said, "How'd you make out?" He didn't seem to want to know where I'd been. Maybe he figured the less he knowed the less he'd have to lie about.

Shortly after dinner an old Indian rode in. He wanted to know if I'd seen anything of that bay stallion they had running out. I acted quite surprised and wanted to know what was on.

He said, "Gone, maybe somebody steal 'im."

I asked him how long he'd been gone and where they last seen him. He handed me a long rigamarole. I acted very sorry, and promised I'd help find him. For several days many Indians rolled in with the same story. I wanted to help every one of them find that horse! As soon as I could see Jack, I talked the thing over with him.

"Gad! Boy! Them Navajos don't even know you've been gone!"

I split with him on the roll. That's the way we'd done with lots of rolls he'd made off the McClain beef. We was getting staky by now. Another year of this and we could buy an outfit of our own!

CHAPTER XII · ON THE TRAIL TO MEXICO

Some time slipped by. The cool fall winds drifted over the country. Old man Young had growed weary of the Navajo racket. He wanted to hit south. They decided a change of climate would be good for him. He sold out his rights around there, took his cows and headed his outfit for old Mexico. He was to go by rail to St. John's, Arizona.

I talked Jack into going along. The McClain outfit wanted him to stay, but their offers couldn't hold a wandering cowboy, good as they was. Two days before the start Jack rolled into our camp. He sure had a keen string of saddle horses — ten head by now. Every danged one of them would make a cowboy's eyes brighten. I held about fifteen. None of them was slouches. We didn't deal in dying dinks!

A couple of days later the trail heading to the south felt the hoofs of fifteen hundred head of cattle, a hundred head of horses, two cowboys, five Navajos and a mess wagon drove by Navajo Jack Moon.

The cattle was restless and hard to handle. We had to stand night guard in turns. Many nights I stood alone. Now and then a skulking wolf or cougar strolled into the herd and stampeded it. That means hard dangerous riding for the rustlers in the dark. At that there was a thrill in it. The world felt wild! It was real action. It made a cowboy's blood pump. You can't explain this feeling to a man that hasn't hollered hisself hoarse choking the dust of milling cattle with only the sureness of his horses' feet to keep him from changing hells. The one with brimstone might be hotter. But there's no kick to beat the red madness of a bellering herd getting further, with darkness and danger ahead and the milling mad herd behind. If your horse falls, they pick you up with a blotter.

After the herd's checked, the rustler must spend some time to quieten them, riding slowly around and singing. You might not believe it, but there is something in the song of a man that takes the fright from any animal.

The cold fall rains started. We rode all day in the rain. When we slept at nights it was in frozen blankets. A flaming camp fire sure was a heaven in them days. The grub was generally soppy and wet. A man feels stiff and cold all the time. If he ever had a soft spot in him, it turns hard. Everything that goes wrong causes an upheaval of profanity. The raindrops boiled as they hit us. We was vaporized most of the way!

I ain't forgot that wet night at Milk Lake yet. I was so danged cold, it makes me stiff-toed to think about it. I was on night guard as usual. There was a batch of Navajos camped close. They had a bunch of yelping dogs. Several times the dogs run into the herd and milled it around. I couldn't get close enough to take a shot in the dark, but while they was down among the cattle, I snuk up to the Navajo camp. I knowed them dogs would come back in a few minutes. I stopped my horse just outside the tent. The dogs come running up all together, and I popped them off right in front of the teepee door. I wasn't more than six feet from them.

Then come loud frightened screams from the Navajos inside. They went out under the back of the tent like a bunch of scart hyenas. I rode away laughing, saying to myself, "Yer dogs can disturb other people in the night; how do you like it yerselves?"

I stood guard till the morning star come up. Then I called Jack. He asked me what time, and I told him morning.

"Why didn't you call me at midnight to relieve you? You're always doin' somebody else's work."

"If I do it myself, I know who's sufferin'."

I laid down to grab a couple of hours sleep. Jack started the fire and stirred the Navajos that was with us. They rolled out grunting, wrapped up in their blankets and stood round the fire. You couldn't stir them out in the cold. I knowed by them signs they wouldn't stick long. They was already having dreams about their warm hogans. They wanted nothing to do but eat and sleep. When we struck Gallup they quit us cold, Jack Moon in the bunch. That left I and Jack with the whole outfit.

The first night in Gallup we went on a bender. We got thawed out some! I was so drunk I couldn't hit the ground with my hat in three throws. Jack wasn't a step behind me.

Next morning I woke in the coal pile by the power house. My old horse was standing with the reins down, right at my feet. I was laying with my face in the fine coal. My arms was over my head, one of them wrapped around a gallon jug of whisky.

The fireman called, "Hey, Boy, you'd better get up and come in and get warm!"

"Warm? I'm blistered. I got to go. Have yer mornin's drink on me."

I handed him the jug. Now if I was anybody's darlin' they'd lost me. I was four times as sick as I was black. It was my first real big heave. At that time I felt it might be my last. I'd been drunk before but not that drunk. I wanted Jack; I wanted breakfast.

I strolled down the street, and the first thing I seen was a Chinese restaurant. I walked in and drunk a cup of coffee and ordered beefsteak. He was so slow getting it, I took three drinks of whisky. When he brought the steak it looked sick. I picked it up and throwed it at him, kicked over a small stove that set in the shack and walked out, wishing somebody would foller me.

I had just discovered what I really wanted. I wanted trouble! I didn't seem able to find it. As I rode off on old Cheekoe, he was as mean as I was. He went snorting and shying up the street. I met the sheriff in the middle of the block. I wanted to start a rumpus with him but he looked too good-natured.

"Partyin', Boy?"

"Yep."

"Have at it!"

I stopped and asked him if he'd seen a feller that looked like he might be my partner.

"Yep, him and his old horse is to sleep up at the livery stable."

I made for the stable as hard as that old pony could run, right up through town. I pulled up in front of the stable and set him on his haunches. I stepped off and started to run. I fell down on top of the jug. It took about three drinks to get me up from there. By that time the livery boys was out. I organized them. We was all presidents and vice presidents, and the Governor from Alabama was there too. I asked them if they'd seen any strange faces around.

"Yep. There's a man and an old horse in one stall in here. We was goin' to put him to bed, but the horse wouldn't let us take him out."

Jack was lying face down in the straw. The old horse was standing over him. Every time I started up towards them, that old horse would lay back his ears and squeal at me. I didn't get close enough for his hind feet but got a rope, tossed it on Jack's foot and drug him out. He woke up with a gun in his hand. Finally, he got his eyes open enough to blink me.

"Where to hell you bin?"

"I hain't bin to hell. I been in a coal pile."

Then we done some more organizing. It took all of my jug and another one to get Jack into the company. By this time we was all presidents of republics. We walked around, and every one we met — hit the jug. When we kicked something over, it meant another jug to straighten it up. Nobody would row with us.

Three hours later found Jack roosting as commander in the chuck wagon. I generaled the herd, assisted by a dog with a leg just healing from a break. He done his dangdest and helped a whole lot. He was a three-legged wonder!

I manipulated the herd through the corner of town with a lot of hollering, fast riding and many drinks to spirit up the outfit. Jack set drowsy on the chuck wagon seat, calling after each drink, "Go after 'em, Cowboy!"

I didn't handle them — just kept them headed south.

Night found us located in a big sagebrush flat about six miles south of town. I stood the night guard, riding wearily, half asleep and half drunk. Jack relieved me at daylight.

"Go to sleep, you old prowlin' hound," he called back to me.

At noon I woke up sober and told him I'd hold the herd while he went to town and got some help. Shortly after dark he returned with three vaudeville actors. They had stiff collars and little white hands!

I thought, "Little girls, you'll get them ruffled up!"

I called Jack off to one side. "Them is sure some lollapoluzzers you found! What you goin' to do with them?"

"They're better than nuthin'."

"By the desert, that remains to be proved! They wouldn't even take the place of a dummy. They won't be able to sleep to-night without sheets. Wait till they roll out in the mornin' with frost on their trousers. They'll find out that ain't playin' tough on the stage. We'll have to build a table and some chairs to eat on!"

I throwed them out about five old quilts and said, "Boys, make yerselves comfortable."

Jack had to show them how to make it down. I wondered how God let such helpless things live.

I told them, "If you feel anything crawlin' round in that bed, don't get excited. It's only Navajo lice."

One spoke up, "Navajos been sleeping in this stuff? If they have, I won't!"

That made me out of sorts.

I said, "By the land-thirsty-sea-rovin' Christopher Columbo — you will! If you don't lay there on yer own accord, I'll tie you in. You might leave in the mornin', but for the night, you've got a boss. AND, furthermore, about two o'clock I'll call you to night herd. If any of the cows is gone in the mornin', you'll ride the worst horse in camp."

"You danged fool, don't scare them to death. They're supposed to be men, even if they don't look it," said Jack.

I guess tucking his babies to bed was kinda getting on

Jack's nerves. About one o'clock I called them. They rolled out like he-men. I give them each a saddle horse, some of the deadest plugs we had — took them out and stationed them around the herd. I tried to show them how to hold cows.

"This is one place," I said, "yer vaudeville singin' will come in fine. I don't know but them old cows might git scart at a song with the right tune to it. Don't git off and do any of yer high-palootin dancin', or some of them old doggies will put a horn in you."

I went to camp and rolled in. Didn't figure on having a darn cow by daylight, but I was tired enough that I didn't care. Daylight rolled in. I looked over the sagebrush. Jack was cooking breakfast. It looked like them vaudevillers had all the cows. They was riding around them in a high trot, one behind the other. Guess they'd wore all their songs out.

"Some parade out there," Jack said. "They got them old cows jammed so tight some of them in the middle is suffocatin'."

I raised up and hollered, "Head 'em to the south and come in and git yer chow."

They rode up and dismounted. All walked towards camp stiff-legged, like they'd gumboils where the saddle fit tight.

I looked them over and thought, "By gosh! yer real sports!" Not one of them had made a whimper.

I told Jack I guessed they was men, but they'd been brought up the wrong way. I felt kinda sorry for the roughness I'd showed them. I loved a man that would try. I only felt sorry for what they didn't know and couldn't do. I started in with great interest to learn them.

I put up with their funny idees and know-nothing ways. I bet they never guessed the curses I swallered under my breath. I wouldn't let them be better men than I was. They was trying their darndest to do their bit. They learned fast because they was interested. It was a circus, though! I come into camp one day and found one hunting all over for a piece of paper to start a fire. He thought he couldn't start one without it. I got some cedar bark and small twigs and showed him how. He laughed and said he sure was dumb.

"Why couldn't I think of that? I'll know better next time."

You didn't have to show them only about once. But you sure had to show them everything that often! They'd unsaddle their horses on the wrong side and take a bridle all to pieces to get it off. I'd go lace it together and put it back on.

One day Jack got mad. He told one of them, "If you don't brighten up, I'll flog you!"

I spoke up, "Looky here, old man, you brought them fellers out here. Now yer goin' to help learn 'em!"

He whirled on his heel, mad at me for the first time. His hand went to his gun, but I already had him covered.

"There's no use you gittin' hard-boiled. Look the thing over and be a man. If you'd been raised on pavement with a forket-tailed coat and a come-to-the-celebration hat, you'd be as dumb as they are. Don't you fergit it. In town, them boys can laugh at you. You'd be a fine-lookin' duffer on the stage. They'd rotten egg you on sight. You'd take stage fright and snag yerself to death runnin' through the scenery."

This struck Jack funny.

"I never looked at it that-away. You're right."

He walked over and stuck out his hand. I shoved my six-shooter back in my belt and gripped him.

"By gosh! You've got more patience than any man I ever seen," he said. "If you can work hard to make somethin' out of nuthin', I'll help you."

I looked around for the vaudevillers. They'd vamoosed. Two of them was hid behind the chuck wagon and the other behind a tree.

"Come on, boys," I said; "she's all over."

Them two that come from behind the chuck wagon was as white as they'll be two hours after death. I forgot to tell you they all stood up and et off the chuck wagon. They was too sore to sit cross-legged in the sand like we done.

I took a liking to one feller we called Ray. He was a tall, dark-complected feller weighing about one hundred and sixty. He was gaunt and had the action of an outdoor man. He moved easy like a cat. He had a quick flashy eye that saw a lot in one glance.

I noticed he'd tried already to put his clothes on like a cowboy and set erect in his saddle. He swung into it with ease and had a gentle hand. He never fought his saddle horse. He took part of the blame on himself. Never laid it all on his horse as most greenhorns do. I never seen him misuse anything. He spent many hours petting the old lame dog, trying to do something that would help him.

The other two fellers was about of a kind. Both light-complected, a little inclined to be fat and slow in motion. They'd get angry and abuse their horses. They longed to be back stage. They would ride for hours side by side, trailing the herd along. They'd ride right past a cow. Sometimes I'd have to holler at them to bring her along. One was named Nick. The other we called Jim.

A month or so rolled on in this way and found us near Fort Apache in the White Mountains. It was rough in the bottom of the draws, but the high peaks was smooth and heavy-timbered. There was lots of scrub oak and underbrush in the bottoms of the canyons. This made it hard to drive stock. They'd wander off into that. Sometimes we'd lose one or two.

Fort Apache was in a hubbub when we struck it. The Indians was on the warpath. They got it in their head the government wasn't doing right by them. They thought they should have more money and more rations. Indians have to stir up something every once in a while or they're not happy.

An old Medicine Man named Two Song wanted to make his life historical, so along with this other trouble and dissatisfaction he told the Indians he'd got the message from the North Wind God that the time was about to come when all the Indians would die and the best thing for them to do was to raid the whites. They'd always been walked on by the white tribe, now was their chance to get even. On a certain date they was all going to die and they should take as many whites with them as possible.

These two things made a real hubbub. The biggest part of the Indians was hid up in the mountains, making medicine and war dancing. One Indian now and then was all you ever seen skulking through the timber. The white people around there was pretty well worked up.

This throwed a kink into Jim and Nick. They curled up and quit. I paid them off, and they took the stage for San Carlos, Arizona. That closed the chapter on them. This made us short-handed, but Jack and Ray and me kept mosying on.

We trailed quietly and carefully along in the daytime. We watched everything that moved. One old Indian behind a rock could pick off all three of us. We was thinking they might do it!

At night we night-herded, sleeping only when the cattle did. We hid ourselves in a triangle position around the cattle. They wasn't hard to herd them days. They was getting leg-weary. We was traveling slow, an average from ten to fifteen miles a day. It was tedious going!

It would have been too bad for somebody to come sneaking around us. We'd have killed him first and then went over and asked him what he wanted. Everything that stirred we thought was an Apache. We snuk from one shady spot to the other, our rifles in our hands. We was like skulking coyotes.

That way we strolled on for some ten days. Each man was dog-tired, his fighting blood pumped close to the surface. Old man Young never showed up till we hit San Carlos. He looked the stuff over and said everything was fine. He told us to hit the Mexico border as soon as possible. He left us a couple of hundred dollars' expense money and the free road ahead. We had about three weeks' travel before we'd meet him again.

We'd got into a low climate. It made the going much better. The stock sauntered along, doggy-like in the heat. We didn't have to night-herd any more. They was far enough from their own land. They didn't care to wander. We broke broncos in our spare time — the ones we had with us.

At nights we'd set in camp, sing cowboy songs and tell stories of days gone by. This interested Ray. He'd hailed from back East and was going nowheres. By now he growed to be a part of the West. He cracked the late stage jokes and sung songs. We kinda traded our junk for his.

CHAPTER XIII · THE BORDER

Old man Young had been into Mexico and bought a ranch. All the help around the ranch in the line of Mexicans stayed with him. They met us at the Mexican border — old man Young and about ten greasers. When he come up, I asked him if he intended to keep that mob. He said he did.

"Well, then," I said, "I guess you can git along without us fellers."

"I don't want you boys to leave. I'll have lots of use for fellers your size. You can run the outfit and do the line ridin' to guard against Mexican bandits. These greasers can do the work."

We had a high idee of a rough cow country that lay east of there and further south into old Mexico. We settled up with the old man. He tried to get us to stay, but it was no use.

We cut out our string of horses. It amounted to about twenty-five head by then. I told the old man he'd better give Ray the outfit he was using, he'd been a good hand, and he give it to him. Ray sure appreciated it. I called him into our string of horses and willed him three head of mine. One big gray horse, called Skyline, was worth a heap of money in a cow country. Jack give him two more. That made Ray the proud owner of six head of saddle horses, a good outfit and a few months' experience.

We was camped on a good water hole. Grass and rest was plenty for the horses. We helped Young's outfit get started. We watched them fade out of sight over a long flat covered with heavy sagebrush. Then we turned to camp to calculate. We spent all the rest of the day at it. Ray kept a watchful eye on the saddle ponies.

This was about the time of old Villa's career in Mexico. You might as well say there wasn't any law in that country. The Mexican bandits run as they pleased. If they took a notion to move a rancher or anybody, they just naturally killed him and took possession. A good many white settlers was killed and also many of the higher-type Mexicans with money. Them bandits didn't have any love for a white man. They just killed them to watch them die. The Mexican rebellion started about nineteen eight. The bandits had got pretty well organized by the time we struck Mexico in nineteen eleven. I was going on seventeen then.

Noon, the fourth day after Young left us, we was headed towards the cow country off to the southeast. We hadn't gone far when one of the horses in the head of the bunch whistled, and shied off to one side. Something was hid behind a clump of sagebrush. We seen it move. We straightened up ready for action, creeping towards it. We didn't know whether it was Yaqui Indians or Mexican bandits ambushing us. We pulled up close. Sure enough, it was somebody hid!

Jack hollered, "Come out of there or you won't be able to!"

At that a half-crying voice rung out, "Please don't shoot!"

He stood up. He was a young white boy about sixteen years old. He was frightened and hungry. His clothes was ragged, and he had no shoes. His hair showed a tint of red in the sun. He was tall, built in the same proportion as a toothpick.

Jack asked him what he was doing there and where he was headed. He told the story of what happened to his parents. He said they owned a ranch about a hundred miles south and was well fixed. One night while they was sitting out on the porch — him and his mother and father — a Mexican rode past on a run and shot his mother. The old man and him and his two brothers was burying her a couple of days later, when the Mexican snuk from the brush and shot his father. The old man fell on his mother's grave. The boys took to the timber. He didn't know where his brothers had went. He was headed north.

We stopped and made a bit of lunch for him. He'd had a pretty rough deal. We decided to take him along with us. After he was filled up, Jack staked him to a gray horse, put a bridle on him and asked the kid if he minded riding bareback.

"No, you bet not. Anything beats walking!"

Ray willed the kid the shoes he had when he come from the vaudeville.

The kid pepped up quite a bit. I found he was as tough a customer as I ever seen. There wasn't any love left in him for Mexicans. He swore by all the holy spots and otherwise he'd kill every Mexican he ever got to. Don't you forgit it, he fit into the company. As an interpreter, he was A1. He'd been educated in Mexican schools, knowed all about their snooping ways, how they manipulated and the best antidote against them.

He watched the country like a buzzard during the day. Many times in the night, I'd lay and listen to him rave in his sleep. He was always and forever talking of killing Mexicans — fighting, fighting. He must have had a danged hard life. He was standing in blood to his waist!

A few days later we pulled up to the Three C (CCC) outfit. It was an American concern, and we put in our bid for a job.

We was hired before we knowed it. The boss was darned pleased.

"Boys," he says, "this looks like a rosebush in the Yukon, almost too smotherin' good to be true!"

That night we made down our bunks in an old log house with an adobe fireplace. The Kid come over to me.

"If you'll let me take that Winchester of yours," he said, "and a couple of quilts, I'll go out close to the corral and sleep. I don't like to stay in houses."

I guess he figured the wide open was better for him. As long as we stayed there, he never slept inside. Every night after dark he moved his bed to a new place.

They put me to riding the north boundary. That was a risky job. Ray and Jack patrolled the south lines, some forty miles away. The Kid held down the duties around the ranch as a horse jiggler. One of the old hands on this outfit picked a Mexican off one day in the cactus valley that laid on the CCC range. He had a doggone good riding outfit. The Kid glommed it. He was a full-fledged cowhand now. He was so cussed tough he had to sneak up on the dipper to get a drink of water. He carried an old forty-four the company give him. It was so big it made him walk lopsided.

I guess about two months of this rolled on. I'd had some trouble on the north boundary. A time or two tracks showed that cattle had been drifted out to the north. I'd been lucky in trailing and bringing them back without much grief.

Never before had I thought anything about getting killed, but now I was sure watching my stuff. I never used a trail at all. I wore heavy leather chaps and buckskin shirts, and could ride easy through the heavy timber, mesquite brush, cactus and catclaw. Everything in that country had stickers on it — even the Mexicans. I figured their knives was their stickers. That's the main thorn I was dodging. I spent hours just traveling a couple of miles in order to keep out of sight.

One day I saw the Kid riding the old El Paso trail. I was hid in the brush. I hollered and he come over.

"You'd better come into the ranch," he said, "Jack must have got picked off. He hasn't showed up for two days."

I went down into the heavy brush where my camp was hid, got my horses and started. I rode the lead. The Kid brought up the rear. We hit the ranch about dark. Nothing had been heard of Jack.

Next morning I took some grub on the back of my saddle, plenty of ammunition, two six-shooters, a Winchester, and an old coyote-hound nobody would ever bother with. He always laid around the ranch. He was great on traveling out in the lead of you about a hundred yards. I figured he'd be apt to scent anything that hid in the brush. He might help locate Jack and he'd scare up any Mexicans that was hiding along the trail.

I rode hard all day, follering trails and all tracks of horses, that looked like they had riders. Night come and no sign of Jack. I et some cold biscuits and beefsteak and curled up for the night. I wasn't setting up no fire for target practice.

I hit the trail again by daylight. About noon the old dog was traveling a hundred yards in the lead. Suddenly he bristled up. He made a few bounds and barked a time or two. I fell off my horse and took the first bunch of brush for a hiding place. I watched the action of the dog. I didn't know but what it was Mexicans hiding. Soon he quietened down. He went up and sniffed something. I couldn't tell what it was. I watched for some time.

Finally, I figured the old dog wouldn't go up to a Mexican.

With a six-shooter in each hand, I crept forward. I heard a moan. My heart pounded.

"I guess it's Jack!" I says.

When I drawed close enough to see I found it was. God! what a sight! His face was covered with blood. His eyes rolled slightly and the blood gushed out of his mouth. He was enough himself to know who I was. He had my name on his lips. It come out partly with a groan and a juggling sound. I choked up. I couldn't speak.

He half-raised up and fell limp again. He'd been shot in the face with a shotgun. They'd been too far away for the shot to go deep. He had a bullet hole through his left lung, and a knife stuck in his wrist behind the tendon. I pulled this out, untied my coat and laid his head on it. Then I circled the country to see if anybody was hid near by.

I didn't know just what to do. It looked like it was his last hour. I wanted to get him to camp, but I hated to maul him around and disturb him, if this was his last. I thought rest would be sweeter, if there was any!

I was hurt plumb through. It seemed as though the last of my north country was dying. I had some idee of how the Kid must have felt. I remembered that once I had thought of him as standing in blood to his waist; now I'd waded in myself. But all the blood I vowed I'd draw couldn't relieve Jack for one minute. I guess a lot of folks have stood by while some one they thought a heap of was suffering!

My old dog growled. I sunk into the bushes, both hands full of guns. I gripped the stocks of my six-shooters till my hands was sore. I was mad with hurt. Minutes dragged like hours. I felt chills run over me. My eyes blurred with the close watching of the brush, till it all seemed to move.

The old dog bristled and barked again. I heard the pound of many horses' hooves. If it was a lot of Mexicans, I might have a fighting chance or it might be the finish of two instead of one.

The outfit recognized the old dog's bark. They hollered, "Hoie-there-who is it?"

That's the first time my own language ever sounded so good to me. It rang through the air like a silver bell. I answered. The Kid rode in sight. Him and a bunch of boys had left the ranch a few hours behind me.

The boys was sick at the sight of Jack. He was pitiful! They'd come to love him as men on the open range often grow to love each other. He'd made a place for hisself as a ringleader of good times and clean sport. If there was a big load to lift, he was on the heavy end. He never missed fire when he done anything. He had nerve and now he'd been butchered — gutted like a dog.

We drawed apart and had a long talk as to what to do. The only way we could get him to the ranch was to carry him on a stretcher. We found a couple of long thin poles, tied a Navajo saddle blanket between them and used that.

As we plodded down the trail with Jack he groaned and each groan sounded like his last. We took turns carrying him, two at a time. The rest of the day and all that night wore on that way. Once when we laid him down I heard him murmur in a gurgling tone. The words come between gushes of blood from his mouth.

"Let me rest. I'm tired. It's all right if I die!"

He went into a delirium. I was glad to hear that. I knowed he wasn't suffering. The Kid never tired. He rode to every near-by stream and carried water in his hat.

About noon the next day we drug into camp. Every man was heartsick. An old lady at the ranch took the responsibility of Jack, and we went to catch up some sleep. The old lady told us at the supper table that Jack had taken a drink of water. This cheered us.

One old feller said, "Where there's life, there's hope."

The hope looked slim to me. By noon the next day Jack's fever had dropped; he felt a bit better.

I went back to my guard on the north border. They sent the kid along. They wouldn't allow one man to go alone no more. We always rode about fifty yards apart. I generally took the lead, the Kid watched from behind.

Nothing disturbed us. In a couple of weeks we went to camp to see how Jack was making it. He was able to set up on his pillows. He wasn't permitted to talk much yet, but he smiled when he heard my voice. He couldn't see much. His eyes was crossed. Many small holes marked his face.

We went back to guard duty for another two weeks.

When we returned Jack was setting up around the house. He was getting along fine, but his eyes was still crossed. When he tried to look at anything it looked like six muddled figures instead of one. He told me, then, how it happened.

He was riding along when he heard the bushes crack just behind him. As he turned to look, they shot him with a shotgun. At that he fell off his horse and shot in the direction of the bushes a time or two. He scattered them. When he raised a little, one plugged him in the lungs with a forty-four. That must have been the last of their cartridges. There was five or six after him. He was laying there, partly on his elbow, when a knife sailed from the bushes. He throwed up his arm to guard his face. It sunk in his wrist right behind the tendons. He guessed they figured him dead. Anyway they left him. That's where he laid when I found him.

A few days after this talk he tried to look in the glass. It strained his eyes someway, and they flipped back in place. He sure was some happy man. In the meantime he had wired home, somewheres back in the New England states. He found out there was a bunch of money left him by his folks and they'd been hunting him. His folks owned some tobacco interests — I don't know just what.

He figured his roughing days was over. The shot through his lungs shortened his wind. He'd better take the opportunity to quit while he had it. He give his outfit and all of his horses to me. I kept a couple of the top horses and turned the rest over to Ray and the Kid. A few days later the supply wagon would be headed for town. He planned to go in with it. I hated to tell him good-by!

He said, "Boy, you'd better come along before you git bumped off. I've got enough money for both of us. If you will, it's half yours."

I told him I was still young and able to kill Mexicans. I'd help blaze a trail in that country so some day it might be settled with civilized people. He made me promise to take care of the Kid and bid me good-by.

I watched him going over the hill out of sight. Now, he wasn't the healthy reckless feller I'd first met. He'd sowed his wild oats and civilization was going to harvest them. I wonder what my life would have been if I'd gone with him. I have never heard from him since.

CHAPTER XIV · SOUVENIRS

I wandered restlessly around camp for several days. Often the Kid or Ray would ask me what was wrong. I'd shake them off and say, "Nuthin'." Nothing but whisky would quieten this and I got it. I stayed drunk for about two days.

The boss come up to me. "The round-up is pullin' in the morning. Are you goin' with them?" I nodded my head, and he went away. The Kid hung to me like a brother and wanted to wait on me hand and foot.

We was about four days out on the round-up. I was riding a bronc, doing some night herding, when the horses stampeded. They run for three or four miles through heavy timber, before I finally headed them. The bronc I was riding was pretty near winded. The horses whirled to the right to pass me. As I rode ahead of them again, my horse fell.

The last I remember was the pounding of hoofs. They was tramping me into the ground. Sometime in the afternoon the next day the boys found me. My hips was smashed. I was pretty badly scratched up. The next I knowed I come to in the hospital in El Paso, Texas, four days later. It seemed like a clean white place to me.

A nurse was saying, "Lay still; if you get excited it's apt to be the finish of you!"

Each day found me a little better. They had me in a cast from my knees to under my arms. The bed looked soft, but it felt harder than any rock pile I'd ever seen. They nursed me along for about three weeks, then I was put in a wheel chair. I spent another month that-away. I sure did get tired of that hospital grub.

One day the Kid drove into town in an old buckboard, and stopped in front of the hospital. He sure looked good to me. He soon loaded me in and we was on our way. A hard day's drive brought us back to the ranch. Crawlin' hours! That place was gloomy and forsaken!

I had travel in my feet and was fer gittin' further. Ray and the Kid wanted to head for the U.S. We monkeyed around a couple of days, settled up with the boss, gathered our horses and headed for the north.

In about half a day's travel we met up with the Adams boys. They was eleven of them — brothers and half-brothers and cousins and more half-brothers. They belonged to a Mormon family that had moved in there in the early days. Things had got so doggone hot they was pulling out. They'd lost a bunch of their stock and we decided to lay over and help gather it. They had about four hundred head of cows. What horses they had and ours totalled about three hundred. I couldn't stand much riding, so I loafed around camp.

Two days and we headed north together. We traveled to within six miles of the boundary line. We was mosying along pretty good through a sage flat. We'd come from a bunch of timber over a sand flat before we hit the sage. It growed as high as a man on a horse.

Suddenly we heard a disturbance in the timber. We all stopped and listened. We soon learned we had about seventy-five bandits follering our tracks.

One of the Adams boys said, "It's fight to the boundary now. We can't let them yeller devils git in here on us. There's enough to take us prisoners and use our stock to suit theirselves. You know what hell lays for an American prisoner in a bandit camp. If they don't butcher him they will do something worse."

It meant fight to the finish. They wasn't any of us had a hankering for a necktie party at the mercy of them red-flaggers. As they come out of the timber into the sand flat, we jumped off our horses and opened fire on them.

The bandits charged us heavy about two thirds of the way across the sand flat. They was coming in a solid formation. It was harder to miss 'em than it was to hit. We was well under cover in the sage. We'd shoot from one place about twice and then move. That was a blood-spilling good time! Mexicans rolled off and fell off and slopped off their horses in every direction. I bet I saw twenty-five riderless horses taking to timber.

The Kid was fighting just opposite me. He was a demon! Say, he was one blazing glory — that's all. Every time he shot, a grin come on his face. He danced up and down, yelling his thanks to Gawd Almighty for his chance to get them yeller-bellied lizards. He wasn't trying to duck bullets — just to send some. He'd have set us all on fire if any of us had gone cold in that scramble.

The second time they charged they got more lead and hell. Every gun in that outfit barked, and each bark meant a dead Mexican. That Kid shifted to and fro. He never let up shooting. I looked for him to get his can popped off. I knowed he wasn't even thinking of that.

The third time they swung at us every man was empty and reloading. That give them a chance to hit the edge of the sage. Some of them quit their horses and took it afoot. It commenced to look like it was going to be a mean fight. Another roar of our guns checked them some. Part of them wheeled back, and it got so hot the rest turned. A few had hit the sage on foot. One at a time they run back. None of those on foot ever reached the timber. Most of them stopped just this side.

We laid there a long while and listened. When we figured they must have went back, we commenced to holler at one another for roll call. Every man answered "here." Ray showed up with a bullet hole in his right foot. It was a big nasty hole made by one of them old model soft-nosed bullets.

That Kid was on the prowl, right away! He rounded up a string of twenty or more Mexican horses. They was all branded with TONTO across the left thigh. They joined our bunch for permanent migration. We was all leaving Mexico! Every man had wrote a message for the coyotes to deliver and the crows to caw themselves fat over.

We straightened around, give Ray's foot a little first aid and drove peaceably to the boundary line. It took about an hour and a half. Now you can take it from me we was pounding our old doggies on the tail! We had dinner on Uncle Sam's soil. Every man faced the south with his liquor and cursed every Mexican that would show up there. The next morning we split. The Adams boys headed for the west.

Ray and I wanted the Kid to go up into Colorado with us. He said if we didn't mind, he'd pull out his horses and stay there. He wanted to watch for his brothers and pop off every yeller belly he could. We tried to talk him out of it. He said he'd stay if he had to take it afoot. At that we bid him our last good-by. I don't know whether he got killed or not. Up to this day I've never heard.

I and Ray rolled on for a couple of months. We had an awful time with his foot. He had to ride along with it out of his stirrup, holding it up behind his saddle when in brush and timber. This left everything up to me but the grumbling and grouching. He took good care of that, and I wasn't blaming him.

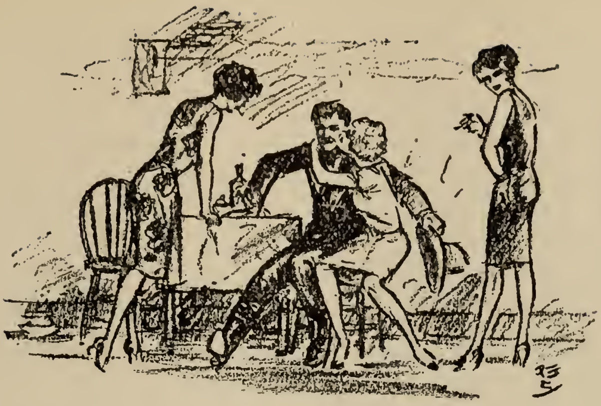
Now, we was pretty well burnt on Mexico! We'd had five months of grief trailing into it and about as long in collecting Jack's crack-up and my smashed hips. Then the hell getting out to collect Ray's souvenirs, so we all could have something to pack along with us. In cash I had better than a thousand dollars and fifteen head of horses. Ray had ten head and some money.

When we hit back into the Gila Valley in Arizona it was hotter than seven kinds of hell. If there was any shade around we set ourselves to collecting all we could get into our hides. This moping around got Ray. He fell in love with a fair damsel and tried to talk me into sticking around — maybe buy a little old ten-acre farm and set down. That didn't soak into me worth a snack. I didn't think my hands was made to fit a pitchfork handle or a shovel. I knowed darn well my mind wasn't.

I argued and talked with him for about a month, I guess. One morning I woke up on the emigrant list. I walked down and told him he could either take the fair damsel or me. I was going. He seemed to be between the Head Fireman and the blue sea. He wanted to go with me but he must have wanted the girl worse. He stayed!

Yes, I and his fair damsel — we split up. I can see her yet. Effie Bingham was her name.

Thank Gawd, I was horse-tied but skirt-free! Up to this time none of that disease called Love had ever crept into me. I figured you could reason with an old horse or else flog it out of him. You couldn't do either with a woman. Women was mighty nice things but they was better free than captured.



CHAPTER XV · CHICAGO

I packed up and hired out to the Horseshoe outfit as a cowhand. The boss over there took a liking to my string of horses. He started to deal me out of them. He ding-donged at me. He went up on the price to one hundred and fifty apiece straight through on the fifteen head. I let him have them.

I'd got to where I didn't know what I wanted. I just felt like I wanted to travel some place. Nothing seemed good to me. My feet itched. I wasn't good company for anybody setting still. They was shipping their beef to Chicago, so I thought I'd take on a little high life. I sacked up my old duds and outfit, stored them with a feller and went with the trainload of beef to Chicago.

This took about a week of rumbling, roaring, rattling steel. I didn't know there was so much land on earth. I seen more freight cars juggled in one week than I ever imagined was on the globe. That shipping cattle ain't no wampoodling good time, I want to tell you. No sleep, and eat when you get a chance. Just travel-travel-travel. I'd flop on the chairs in the caboose, snatch an hour or two of snore, and then take back along the cars to see if things was going all right. If an old cow happened to get down in a car, I'd have to crawl in over the other cattle, mill around among the heels and horns and lift her up, if she wasn't already dead. That ain't no fun to the jerking of a train. Sometimes me, cows and all would pile up.

When I hit the high lights of Chicago I was looking for trouble. It was some different from what I had figured, the rumble, rumble, rumble of street cars, taxis and automobiles. I was just dizzy with the goin' and comin', whizzin' by on both sides. People stopped and looked at me as if I'd been some kinda fire-eater. I guess I wasn't no fashion plate in that town. That ten-gallon hat of mine showed up like a tin-roof garage in a fog.

I rolled into one of them white linen restaurants where they serve all dishes and no grub. Women set around and supped tea like it was hot solder. There was a fancy waiter stood right by me like as if I didn't know enough to wait on myself. A time or two he reached for something the same time I did. I had to shove him out of my way. I figured I was old enough to feed myself. When I got through eating and got up, my spur caught on the bottom rung of my chair. I throwed it sprawling on the floor. Every body looked around. They highbrowed me as if I didn't have any right in there with an accident.

A few minutes later I rolled into a barber shop. I couldn't read the name on the outside. It was too big for me. I no more than landed in the chair till about nineteen started to decorate me. Old Chief White Eagle never had nothing on them. They was busy — some on my boots, one on my head and more on my hands. I wondered what they aimed to do. I found out when I come to pay. Three-fifty, if you please!

Cow hell! I was duded up as far as hands, face and feet went. I walked down the street. I couldn't hardly believe them boots was my own. I nearly jammed the traffic, looking at them. I worried a lot of people's eyes, but I just plowed on through. I wondered how people could live and breathe the same air over and over again as it looked like they had to do there. Every one was in a rush!

I seen a rough-looking feller leaning up against a lamp-post. He seemed about as busy as me.

I said, "Say, where's the high spots in this town?"

He eyed me up pretty doggone close, showed me where to catch a high-line car and told me where to get off.

He said, "Any part of that place is high life!"

That high-line car made such a fuss about itself I commenced to think the darn thing had wings. I was glad to get off. I mosied over to a place that looked like a coffee shop and set down.

About forty girls swarmed around me. Of all the little pet names they was calling me! I thought, "This is a funny outfit — what have I bumped into?"

I soon sized them up and figured out what it was. Some of them didn't wear much more than a sneeze and a ring. I guess when the weather got cold they'd just put on bigger earrings. One walked right up, set down on part of my chair and put her arms around me. I thought she was after my roll. I had a big one.

I give her a shove and said, "Get to hell out of here!"

That seemed to startle them all. They stepped back and I stepped out.

Well, I just started to mope around that country, looking it over. I went to every place I seen a light. Some of the things I seen I ain't going to mention. Finally I got angry to think people would act like cattle.

I always held a woman as a pretty high article. This made them drop in my estimation. They was cheaper than dirt and harder to get shed of. I wondered how they lived in such a mob, what they wanted and what was going to become of them. I sucked in a breath or two of that stiff stale air. It made me hanker for the clean West.

It made me hate the fact that I belonged to the same race of people. I figured them little dried-up shrimps wouldn't have guts enough to stick a man up if he showed fight, so I just straightened up, folded my arms and bulled my way through the crowds. If any happened to step in my way I shoved them aside and went on.

Being tired and hating everything I seen around there put a kink of hell in my spine. Trouble and plenty of good hot whisky was what I wanted. I was in an enemy's country. I wanted everybody to know I knowed it. I didn't have any friends there and sure didn't want any.

Once or twice I went into the dance halls. The dancers was half naked and the rooms full of smoke. Some of the dancing looked more like wrestling than anything else. Many of the girls looked at me and smiled, but they never done it a second time. I'd rip out an oath and tell them to hand that to their own breed.

I was about nineteen then, but had been ranked as a man for years and doing a man's work for as many. I felt as though I could handle a dozen of them half-baked weasels all at once. The men was runty and slouched in their gait. They wasn't anything you could talk to. I wouldn't bother to even step on one. If this was civilization, I was an outlaw from then on! Anything I could do to set her back was just that much gained. I was on the warpath with my own tribe. I hated them and all they belonged to!

As I staumped through the streets, I saw dim lights through small dirty windows down the alleys. Scrawny dogs and cats prowled beneath them. I wondered what they'd do if they saw real sunlight and clean stars. People had tuned their voices to a high twang I had never heard before. I was used to the drawl of cowboys and the guttural noises of Indians.

I wanted to get out of this place, yet I wanted to see all there was to see. I wanted to hear the hoot of an owl and the yell of a coyote. It would sound cheerful there.

I went into one of the small dirty bars and had a couple more drinks of whisky. Even their whisky was diluted and rotten. I knocked the glasses off the bar, swore at the bartender and walked out. I was looking for trouble but couldn't find it. They wouldn't even foller me!

I caught a taxi and told the driver to head for the first west-bound train out of this swine shed. My ticket to El Paso was as big as newspaper. That old train couldn't put that scenery behind me any too fast. I was tired and soon fell to sleep on the cushions. Crawling hours! I didn't know they had Pullmans them days!

It must have been about ten hours later that I woke up. My throat was burnt with whisky and my head ached. Maybe it was rheumatism of the skull with all the deep thinking I'd done.

Soon a nigger porter hollered, "Fuhst call foh dinnah!"

I wondered where'd they serve dinner in a place like that. A feller raised up that had a hungry look on his face, and I follered. As I passed the pantry door a big nigger said, "Hello, theah, Cowboy! Fuhst punchah I've seen since I left Dallas, Texas!"

I figured this was a chance for a drink. I stepped into the pantry.

"Say, Boy, you got anything that's good for a fire in the throat?"

He kinda grinned and produced a pint of whisky. I tipped it up. "Here's lookin' at yer."

I never took it down till it was half gone. I slipped him a dollar and the rest of the bottle and headed for the dining room.

That was another one of them white table-clothed places. They even had tweezers to handle the loaf sugar.

This eating on a rocking train was out of my line. I spilt coffee all over. People sure was watching me with "what-almighty" eyes. I think some of them figured I spoiled the air they had to breathe. I knowed darn well they spoiled mine!

I was one glad man to see that old train roll into El Paso. I headed straight for a restaurant and ordered some of the "western style." How I did tuck the groceries out of sight! I never felt so free and good since the day I was born.

A couple of days later I was strolling up the street in one of them million-dollar moods when a man that looked like a Northern cow-puncher stepped up.

"Boy, you looking for work?"

I said, "You're darn right. Lead me to it!"

He told me he was shipping some cows to the north and wanted me to go with them to Lysite, Wyoming. I met the train at the Sante Fé stockyards. Sixty cars! You bet I had my hands full! The cattle was poor and weak. Picking in that country had been darn short on account of no rain. Many of the cows was calving along the way. That added more work to it.

I bedded one car heavily with hay for cows with calves. Along the way I gathered up all the hobos I could find. They'd get in the car, push the cows and calves to one end and get down in the hay under cover, so the railroad bulls couldn't find them. When I'd stop to unload and feed at different yards, the helpers around the yards would stage a regular celebration when I'd open the door. Out would come the cows and calves and hobos! Up we'd go to a restaurant and get something to eat. I'd tell them when the train was pulling out and where to meet me. My car was plumb full of hobos, calves and cows before the fourteen days brought me to Lysite, where we unloaded for the last time.

The boys from the ranch had been waiting in town two days for me. We soon had seventeen hundred head on the trail to the north. A couple of days' travel and we turned them loose in Long Creek Valley. There they got fat and wild as buckskin in no time. That was the first time some of them ever had been real fat.

That outfit was a pretty rough bunch. Nary two cowpunchers in that layout was raised in the same country. They all had different ways with stock and that raised many arguments. I'd heard that there was real riders up there. I didn't want to get listed as a bronco-fighter, for fear they had something too heavy for me. When the boss asked me if I could ride bad ones I said, "No, nuthin' but gentle stuff."

I figured I'd have a chance to demonstrate instead of talking. He didn't look very pleased over this. Right there I knowed there was something funny in the air.

Them fellers naturally thought a man from Texas was a real rider. As the days rolled on, I found out them boys wasn't what they was cracked up to be — or else I didn't know my stuff when it come to handling a bad horse. They asked me funny questions. They inquired many times where I was raised. I told them on a sidehill back of a sawmill or something like that.

One day they figured on tricking me, but I smelt it as soon as they started. They brought me a big glass-eyed roan horse called Glazier.

One of the boys said, "Here's a good mount fer yuh. He's as good a cow hoss as they is on this outfit!"

"Well, if he's so darned good, why ain't one of you ridin' him? Where I come from, the old hands always belonged to the good horses."

I'll admit I was itching for a bad one. I'd shipped my own outfit, and I soon saddled and mounted. I rode him off across the corral, looking back and patting him on the hip. This seemed to get the horse's goat. He didn't know what was carrying on. He must have been used to feeling stiff legs grip him and a hard jerky hand on the rein. I found out afterwards he always bucked. I just seemed to be a hoodoo on him. He trotted off out of the corral and across the valley.

That made the boys sore. Not a man left the corral. They all stood to watch. They looked like they got cheated out of something they was expecting. They tried me with a couple of more old bad ones. As luck had it, I eased them off the same way. I was robbing them fellers of stuff that was good for the eyes. They didn't want to see me ride; they wanted me piled!

Finally they brought in a bay horse called High Power. He was one spell-winder. We'd just come out from dinner.

The boss said, "Boy, you can ride that bay horse there. He acts a little snuffy at first. You'll have to rope him and drag him out of the cavy. He's a pretty bad egg to saddle and git onto, but he won't buck when he gits started."

He couldn't have told a bigger lie than that if he'd rehearsed for twenty years. I had to throw the horse down to put a hackamore and saddle on him. When I let him up and was standing there, waiting a minute, the boss said, "Say, Boy, what's yer name?"

"Anything you can think of will suit me."

About that time one of the boys let a snaky bay horse out of the corral. I looked at him and said, "He sure is a wampus cat, ain't he?"

One of the boys hollered, "Wampus is yer name!" That was it from then on.

I tried to get on High Power. He wouldn't stand for it. He'd come up striking at me. I got a rope and caught him by both front feet. He lunged around a bit and then stood still in a sulk. One of the boys on a horse held him tight while I mounted.

The boy dropped the rope. I hit High Power with both spurs. Right there he started to unwind. He made about fifteen wicked jumps, squealing and snorting every time he hit the ground. The dust rolled up from the dry corral until I couldn't see nobody. Then he throwed up his head and stood still for a minute.

A bronc fighter on that outfit by the name of Bill had been sticking up for me all the time, but I didn't know it.

It pleased him to see old High Power get worked over. He run up and throwed me a heavy chain quirt. I caught it and slapped the old pony between the ears with it. At the same time I anchored my right spur in his shoulder. He squealed and was off for another session. Round and round the corral he went. Gad! I thought he'd never quit! I spurred on both sides and whipped him over the head. A time or two I heard the bronc fighter yell, "Ride 'im, Cowboy!"

Then High Power lost his feet. He fell to the ground. I throwed my one leg up to keep him from rolling on it. When he got his feet again he found me pawing and raking on both sides of him. He run across the corral and squealed and stopped. I stepped off.

"Boys, don't act surprised. I knowed you was framin' me. I can ride any horse that ever hit this outfit and whip any low-lifed-lyin'-son-of-a-curse that ever run it!"

At that the boss started towards me. I dropped my hackamore reins and run halfways to meet him. We come together with a couple of hard smashes. We went round and round for about three minutes.

I believe I was getting a little more than I was handing out, when he straightened up, and I slipped one into his jaw. Down he went. I landed in his stomach with both feet. I was just ready to traump his face when one of the boys pulled me off.

The boss hollered "Nuff" and got up. The boys stood wondering what would happen next. I didn't know myself.

I said, "If any of you other sneakin' curs wants some, step out. Looky here, if you've got any more bad horses to ride, just tell me, don't lie." I turned to the boss and says, "Old-timer, you can make her out."

He says, "Are you goin' to quit?"

"Sure! I ain't goin' to give you the chance to can me."

"I wasn't thinkin' anything of the kind. I'm as good a sport as you are. If I'd 'a' whipped you, I'd have expected you to stay, and bein' as I got it, I want the same thing."

That made me like him. I walked over and put out my hand. We shook with a hearty grip. I turned to finish the job on High Power.

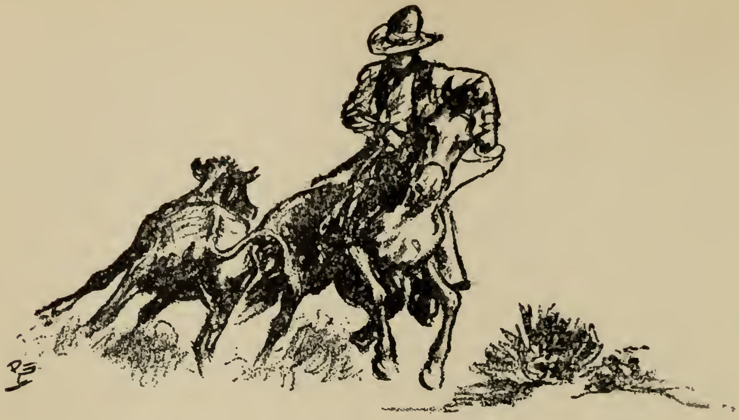
One of the boys opened the bars while two others rode out with me. We'd no more than got through them, before High Power bolted and run like a scart coyote. He made for a wash about ten feet deep. One of the boys headed him off. He fell and I rolled off to one side. The other feller's horse run over me. He kicked my head with his hind foot. I got up dizzy and went back to the corral.

They hazed old High Power around for about fifteen minutes before they finally corraled him. I was waiting for him. I thought, "Old Boy, I'll sure work you out when I get hold of you!"

As he circled the corral, I grabbed the hackamore rope and swung on without touching a stirrup. This surprised him. We was at it again in good shape. He bucked for some time. He got mad under my punishment and tried to lay down. I popped him on the end of the nose and dug him behind the ear with my spur. Up he come and tried me a couple of more jumps. I whipped him around the corral, commencing to rein him by turning him one way and then another. This carried on all afternoon. We sure was getting acquainted! When it come time for supper I unsaddled him and tied him in the barn. Next morning before breakfast we went another round.

The boss said, "That's all you got to do, is work on him till you git him so you can handle him."

I spent about four days at this. He was commencing to look pretty rough after his treatment. Civilizing him was a little hacky on his ribs. Then I eased up, riding him about once every three days. By then I was able to handle cows on him all right. I called him my top horse and nobody else bothered him.



CHAPTER XVI · I GET A RAISE

From then on the whole bunch of us was good pals. Every one was a friend of mine. I topped off all their rough horses in the morning. They had good horses — big, wiry ones raised on the free grass and fresh water. There was more action and endurance in one of them than in ten of those Southern ponies. I loved them! The boss had a good string but they was all kinky in the morning. I'd uncork them for him by riding them two or three hundred yards. I growed fond of this. For the first time I found pleasure in doing for others.

Then come the time for chasing cows on the high summer range. We trailed up the mountain with heavy pack outfits, grub, salt, and grain. This chasing wild cows fell into my line. It was on the same order as running wild horses, only cows never had the speed nor run the distance.

After you chase them until they get tired, they try to hide in the rim rocks and thick timber. This called for a good deal of tracking and being able to swing easy in your saddle dodging limbs and brush. The faster a man could foller one of them tracks, the better hand he was. Now this was all I knowed — horses and cows — but I knowed them critters! If I once saw a horse or a cow, I'd know him ten years from then.

I'd studied tracks and trails among the Indians. I knowed the direction a cow was apt to run through the country. They never run over a high ridge. They generally pick for a low pass, or take down a deep, sandy wash and then suddenly turn off into the rough. A cow knows enough to quit the trails once she's crowded.

A horse always takes to the high country and stops on a northside hill. That's where the timber grows the highest and there's not much underbrush. He always figures on running instead of hiding. Sound travels farther and clearer, because the north hill is cool and quiet. Birds and things that make a noise won't stay in them places.

Knowing these things give me the upper grip on the average hand. I caught my share of wild stock on that outfit.

Maybe you think leading a wild cow out of a rough country is some kind of toad heaven, but it ain't. When you rope one and corner her, she always turns on the fight. That's when you need a good quick horse that knows a fighting cow when he sees her. Times you can turn and she'll start to foller you, bawling and blowing her nose, shaking her old head and taking right at you.

All you have to do is to keep out of her way till she goes into a sulk, then throw her down and tie her feet.

If she acts too snuffy you got to get a pole and knock her horns off. That generally takes a lot of the bear out of her. But you got to know your medicine to get your horse up right close, untie her feet and jump on your horse darn quick. She gets up on the fight and stays on, till she finds out she's lost her horns. When she's wise to this she is your cow. You can rope her and start her down the trail. Then watch her. Every time she comes to a patch of timber she'll turn in and you'll have to drag her out again. Sometimes it takes two or three hours to get her a couple of miles. This recipe is guaranteed to work on any cow. It might not be too bad on some people, if they takes to the timber when wanted.

When the branding round-up started in the summer, the boss said, "What are we goin' to do for a night herder?"

"I'll do the night hawkin', if there's enough money in it." I said.

"Looky here, Boy, yer're the top bronc fighter here now. We got ten head that needs staumpin' out pretty bad."

"Well, I guess I can work them over and night herd too."

"Who ever heard of a night herder ridin' broncs?"

"Well, I never knowed it was anything to hear about. I've done it. You give me a twenty-dollar raise and I'll demonstrate for you."

He said, "Yer called!"

We was all getting fifty-five a month, furnished. A twenty-dollar raise sounded pretty good. It made some of the old boys' eyes stick out a little. One morning the boss met me as I drove the horses into the corral just at daylight.

"You're the first night hawk I ever seen that didn't have his saddle horse all fagged in the morning. I'd like to have a leaf out of yer book and know how you work this."

I told him as best I could. I don't know whether it amounts to much or not. I pass it on because it's what I'd found out, and he seemed to really hanker for it.

Most fellers try to hold their herd too close. That keeps a man milling around them all night. It wears his horse out and don't give the herd a chance to feed or rest. Hang plenty of bells on your herd, then set on your horse and listen to them. If one seems to be straying out from the others, ride out and turn him back. One horse won't generally go off alone. If there's five or six restless ones, there's apt to be a bell on one of them. Once in awhile a feller can ride around his horses quiet like, singing to them and turn them all back to the center.

A saddle horse can always see better than the feller that's on him. If a horse is straying from the herd, he'll naturally notice him and pull out that way.

I always throw my horses out into the open country. I'd rather take them two or three miles farther to find it. It don't amount to nothing, beside a hard night herding in the timber. Horses see shadows in the timber and often get frightened. There is something about the dark outline of timber and the movement of the branches when the wind is blowing that frightens a horse. Bugs and flies hangs around timber too. Cougars and bobcats that prowls in the edge of the timber would frighten a man, let alone a horse.

Another thing, if you get way off in the open country and your horses is pretty well scattered out and feeding good, you can commence to sing and whistle and ride into the middle of them and build a fire. There is something about a fire that holds horses. If the feed's good there, they will feed away from it and feed back towards it. Horses, in this, are like persons. There is something about a fire they love to watch.

A high-spirited horse has some kind of influence over the drony ones. They like to foller him, especially when he's got a bell on. The bell gives you a tab on him.

Horses is very seldom restless before midnight. They want to feed and mosie around slow. When midnight comes they want to rest — lay around for a couple of hours. After that they are easily frightened. That's when you want to look out. Be ready for a stampede. That's generally the hour of the night when all wild animals howl and scream. But they don't usually attack at this time. The cougar will take advantage of their feeding and attack before midnight and then howl about it after him and the herd has fed up and rested a couple of hours.

From four o'clock on, if nothing happens, the herd will drowse and sleep till daylight. If they are frightened at this time, it bewilders them. They run wild and mad. At daylight, when they wake up and commence to stir around, they feel frisky. It's the easiest time of the day to drive them. If there's any play or fight in a horse, he'll go to it then.

The boss spoke up. "Where'd you learn all this stuff?"

"Learn? I never learned; I've seen it!" He looked at me kinda funny, then spit. That's the first time anybody ever called anything I knowed learning. I always thought you learned from books!

From there we drifted on to the Indians. I told him how they called me the White Owl, how I lived with them and chased wild horses when I was a kid, and spent many hours studying their habits and watching their signs. A corral full of horses was the first and only happy hunting ground I ever dreamt of. I'd crawled out of my cradle and went to chasing and night herding.

The boss laughed. "Accordin' to all signs, I guess you did."

CHAPTER XVII · ANOTHER CHANCE

It was slipping into cool weather of fall. The prairie-chicken season come on. Many of the high moguls around the towns come out to the ranch to spend their hunting vacation. I had nothing to do but break broncs. Snow would soon fly, and you can't ride broncs in slick weather.

All of these uptown men got a kick out of bronc-fighting. Them big moguls got busy and promoted a rodeo. My name had spread over the country as a bronc fighter. I received several letters from the committee, asking me if I'd ride.

I went into town one day and talked to them. I told them I didn't profess to be a show rider, and didn't care to be any part of a newspaper story. They said they was putting up a six-hundred-dollar purse and several other small prizes. They thought a man that had spent his time learning to be a bronco rider and done the best he could in the show, had a chance to be paid for it. Six hundred did look pretty good size.

I went back to the ranch, thinking. The old feller that owned the ranch had all kinds of money and three dollars over. He'd been an old cowhand and loved to watch the game. Money didn't count in sports if his outfit could take the lead. He sent orders out that all the men could get off for three days before the rodeo and three days after.

I decided I wouldn't go. You bet all the other boys was on hand — left the morning of their release. They all coaxed me to go along. I said, "No." The night before the rodeo started the owner come to the ranch. He was hell-bent-determined I'd go in and ride for the big money. I could see he was full of sporting blood and wanted his outfit to win.

Finally I told him I'd enter the contest on three conditions. The first was no newspaper blurb, for it was well advertised and looked like a big thing. I wasn't posing for pictures or writing any stories. The second was that if I drawed a horse that didn't look like he could buck, I could turn him back until I got one that did. I didn't want to get out there on some willer-tailed pony that couldn't make a show. If I rode I wanted the worst horse in the whole outfit. Even if a man is a good rider he can't win if his horse won't buck. He said he could fix that up. The third condition was that their judges was picked from a different part of the country and would show no favorites. The man that rode the worst horse and fanned him to a standstill took first place in the finals. Only the second and third to best got a chance. He said not to worry about that, that was the way they'd already fixed it. I piled my old saddle and outfit in his car and we hit for town.

On the way in he said, "Boy, you asked for three things and I give them to you. Will you agree to do it, if I ask you a fair question?"

I told him I would. I figured he was man enough not to ask anything but something that would be for my own good.

"I want to act as your manager while you're in town. It's only three days and it won't kill you to lay off from whisky that long. After she's over, I'll put up the money and you can celebrate in real style. You've got some keen competition to buck. That Bronco Tom from Whisky Gap will be there. He's somewhat of a rider and they've got ooches of money to bet on him. If you'll stay sober, I'll cover all they got."

I agreed to this. Instead of leaving me at the hotel in town, he took me to his home. Listen to me, that old lady of his had things up to snuff! They knowed how to put on the dog. When I stepped into that house, I felt as uncomfortable as a camel in the Arctic circle. I hadn't never seen a house like that before. His wife was sure the queen of the situation. Every time she shook her head a servant run to see what she wanted.

First thing I figured was that my boot heels would muss up them carpets. The owner said, "Make yerself to home, Boy." I could tell he was about to introduce me to his wife.

"What did you say your name was?"

"It's Wampus."

He looked at me for a second as though he was scart to introduce me by that name. Then he turned to his wife.

"This is the boy that aims to pick down the big money."

She give me a kinda hard-boiled look over her glasses. At that I remembered I did look a little rough. The old man broke the spell.

"He's like all the other riders — looks a little rough but he's all right."

She sized me up quite a while and must have changed her mind, for she walked over and held out two fingers. I had to reach up and pull them down. I believe that was the heartiest grip she'd ever got. She smiled. "What was the name?"

The old man picked it up. "Mr. Wampus."

At that I snorted. That old lady give me an awful once over, smiled a little out of one corner of her mouth.

"Make yourself to home, Mr. Wampus."

They had a servant lead me up to a washroom. She stood right there and handed me everything she thought I needed, and there was plenty of it. After I got some of the dirt and horse washed off of me I was led down to supper.

There was more junk on that table than I'd ever seen before. About forty knives and forks. I didn't have no idea which one to start with. I believe they noticed it. I knowed darn well I did. I waited and seen which one they used.

Say, a white napkin on my dirty shirt looked fine. I liked it because one button was off from the front. It kept me busy closing the gap.

Every time I reached for something the waiter beat me to it. My hands put the only dark brown touch to the scenery that there was. I felt like an elephant trying to use a typewriter.

They commenced to circle the stuff around. I loaded up a little too heavy on the first turn. Before they got through, I wondered how I was going to eat my way out.

Crawlin' hours! I set there till I thought I'd be too stiff to ride in the contest. Finally, somebody called "time." I and the old man went into his smoker. I noticed I still had my napkin on. I needed a clean handkerchief so I just wadded it up and shoved it in my pocket.

We talked of olden days. I soon gathered he'd been a cow-punchin' curse in his own day. Inch by inch he'd crept up to this stand. But his old lady had been raised in the East and sure had took on a high polish.

A servant brought some drinks. It didn't take them long to start working in that hot room. The old man began to run off at the head in an unusual way. I know some of the things he told me was unknown in that part of the country.

He talked about the Hole in the Wall in Wyoming. Right there I got interested. That was one of the side issues of the Robber's Roost. He mentioned many names of old-timers. Some I'd heard of but hadn't seen. He told about the war between the sheep men and the cattle men in Jackson County and the way the Roosters worked on them when they was busy fighting there. I gathered that's where he got his start.

He commenced to tell about a deal him and a pal of his pulled stealing cattle and shoving them off into the rough country until the worked-over brands healed up. He told about this feller being a left-handed roper — as good a one as ever he seen. All at once a picture of my old man flared up in my mind. I could see him setting on a big horse he called Billy, swinging his rope in his left hand.

I figured the old feller was full enough that he'd tell me most anything by then. I told him I knowed a feller that was in the Robber's Roost at the time it broke up. He was a left-handed roper and a good one.

"I'll swing! Boy! Do you know the Roost?"

"I reckon I do. I was born in it."

I commenced to question him about this left-handed pal of his. He told me he was a short, dark, heavy-set feller, bowlegged, a good rider, and cussin'-particular about his outfits. I told him I guess we was some relation to ancient history. He wanted to know how.

"If that ain't my old man, I don't know nuthin."

He bored me with a few hundred questions about my whereabouts and who I was, sized me up and said, "I'll swing if you ain't right!"

We talked till after midnight. Finally he said, "Well, if you're goin' to ride in that contest you won't want to be sleepy."

He called another one of them house pests to lead me up to a bedroom. It sure was decorated and comfortable. When I was left alone I pulled the sheets off the bed and crawled in between the dark-colored blankets. I didn't want to leave any black spots on them sheets.

The next morning I had breakfast with a hundred thousand dishes. The old lady never showed up on the scene. I was danged glad of it. After breakfast we headed for the rodeo corrals.

All the boys was friendly. Many come over and made theirselves acquainted. Some must have figured I was hitting on all six cylinders, seeing the old man leading me around. A lot of them was getting a little practice. I didn't join. I figured I had enough to hold. If I didn't, what I'd get in an hour wouldn't do no good.

At ten-thirty she started with a bang. We walked up and drawed our numbers. A white piece of cloth a foot square carrying a number was pinned in the middle of each man's back. I got number thirteen.

The boss squinted. "That's a little rough on the start."

"I'm a lone wolf. Odd numbers is jest right. I always wanted to make something out of what other people wouldn't have."

We went over and drawed horses. This Whisky Gap Tom drawed the big sorrel I really wanted. I drawed a dapple gray, big and nervy. He looked like he had it in him if he'd only turn it on. He was narrow between the ears and wide between the eyes, held his head straight out from his body and had a high hog back. Them's all signs of a real bucking horse. A horse being low-headed and high-backed allows him to double up in a knot, putting his head among his feet. This gives him a high, quick, crooked action, that shows up well for the judges.

I looked the sorrel horse over again. I figured I'd bested this Whisky Tom man in the draw. His horse was tall, high-headed and a bit sway back. Them's speed points. No horse that can run can buck very hard.

There was no drawing turns in riding. The first horse put in the chute is the first to go out. You take yours when he comes.

Three pretty good jumpers had showed when Whisky Tom's sorrel come out. He run about the center of the ring. Tom hooked him in the shoulders and he dropped his head. He made quite a few high straight jumps, sunfished a time or two, then throwed up his head and run to the other side. The whistle blowed and the pick-up man took him off.

Most of the audience knowed Whiskey Tom and yelled long and loud. Some cowboys shot in the air. When the noise quietened one of the riders hollered, "Wind River's next champion."

I answered back. "Not by a damn sight!"

The old man hollered, "Money talks!"

He sure was keeping close watch on me. A good many stockmen and riders walked up to him with money. He covered it all. Many of them eyed me. I could tell some didn't fall for my looks. I was about twenty, but I looked much older. All the cowboys wore show clothes—bright-colored shirts and chaps with plenty of spots and silver decorations. My clothes was rough and plain, like you see on working cowhands every day on the range. 'Course the uptown people thought if you didn't have on fancy clothes, you couldn't ride.

I'll admit I felt a little bit shabby. But I looked around. Every man from the J. Bar D. was behind me and I knowed it. Many I'd met from the joining ranches was there too. I'll gamble they even had their outfits bet on me. This give me courage. If this old gray horse would buck, I'd punish him so hard they'd have to let me in the finals.

Then came a tournament of steer-riding. About seven head had went out when a big red steer bucked over in front of the grand stand and stopped. I jumped onto another feller's horse, rode up to the steer and jumped on behind the rider. Then that steer did uncoil in some shape, bucking and bawling for about five seconds. He left both of us setting in the air and run bellering to the rear end of the ring. After we lit, we got up and brushed our clothes. Yells raised from the grand stand you could have heard for twenty miles. Now she was in full swing all right, everybody feeling good! We locked arms and strolled back to the corral.

After the steer-riding was over, my gray horse came next. The boss hollered, "Wampus from J. Bar D." The crowd was unusual silent while I saddled him. They was waiting for something. They didn't know what it was, and I couldn't say. I crawled on him and yelled, "Cut 'im loose!"

The chute door swung open with a bang. I hooked him with both spurs. He humped up his back and trotted straight for the grandstand and stopped. I spurred him several times. The crowd yelled and roared.

One of them hollered. "You can't show off on a stick horse like that!"

This made me mad, for that's just what I was thinking. I put my quirt between his eyes. Down went his head and he was off. He bucked in a spot about fifteen feet square for about ten crooked jumps. Then he took off to the right, squealing and going high, wide and handsome. I spurred him with both feet, first in the neck and then back in the flanks. With my quirt and hat in one hand I fanned his front parts and looked back over my shoulder at the grandstand. They was all up and yelling!

Then he stopped. He reared on his hind feet and come down facing the other way. Up he went again, lost his balance and come down on his side. I swung free to one side and remounted as he come up, leaving both my feet out of the stirrups. He done a few more high crooked jumps. Again he went up in the air and come down on his side. Just then the time whistle blowed.

I stood beside him as he got up, waved my hat and yelled at the audience. Then come that roar from the stand that's beefsteak to a rider's ears. Louder and longer than ever before it come. I knowed they couldn't bar me from the finals. I didn't have to ride the second day unless I felt like it.

The day went on — riding more horses and steers, roping cows and bulldogging steers, fancy rope spinning and trick riding.

That evening we went back to napkins and silverware for supper. The old man must have told his wife something. She talked to me a lot — seemed almost interested.

"I hear you walked off with the first place at the rodeo pretty easy to-day."

"Nope, I just had a streak of good luck!" I told her.

She kept running off at the mouth. Once she asked me where I was born. The old man took it up.

"Looky here, it ain't polite to ask a cowboy that. He might not want to tell you. He might have to make up a lie that wouldn't fit into the future scenery."

She smiled and excused herself. I had her number right now. It didn't matter who you was. Money or a little fame would win her.

CHAPTER XVIII · YELLOW FEVER

I et a hearty breakfast the next morning. The old lady's eyes weren't on me. Then I headed for the fair grounds alone. I had blood in my eyes and meant to go through.

Some of the boys was on the corral fences looking over the bucking horses. I believed they'd framed me some way. They'd already drawed their horses and all there was left was a big buckskin. He was my lot for the day.

Bad horses was what I wanted. It looked like that was what I had. He was a dun-colored buckskin with a black stripe down his back, small thick ears and pop eyes set well out on the side of his head. He was hog-backed and very short. His legs was heavy and well muscled. He held his jaw straight away from his body on a short thick neck that scrooched into his shoulders. He looked like the bull of all devils. This brightened me up a little. It was a sure chance on the money if I rode him.

I milled around the crowd, looking the other horses over. I stumbled on to the old man.

"How's she goin', Boy?"

He give me the high sign to foller him over to a vacant corral. He pulled out a bottle and give me a big drink, saying, "That will probably steady you a little."

I told him about the buckskin horse and that it looked like a frame-up. His eyes flashed. He clenched his hand, walked straight to the corral and looked in at the buckskin horse.

"I'll swing, if it ain't Yeller Fever from Billings, Montana! He is sure one bad egg. Been shipped in from the Crow Reservation. Do you think you can ride him?"

"I told you I wouldn't draw nuthin' but a bad horse. I've sure had luck in gittin' 'em."

"Yes, but this was an inside rodeo. Foreign horses was barred. I'd like to know who brought him in. Some of them dirty skunks have him here for a bait. They made the draw early this morning so you'd be the last man and he'd be the last horse. That's the only way they could fake this game. They damned well knowed it!"

I told him if he had any more money to go put her up. He turned around half-mad.

"I've got up every cent they'll cover. I'm bettin' on a cinch with your old man's blood in you. But this looks crooked to me. They'd better watch out."

He walked away quick in the direction of the high moguls. I sauntered through the crowd. I met up with the rest of the J. Bar D. boys. Bill, the bronc fighter, was ready to cheer me. Every one in the outfit warned me to lay off from whisky. The rodeo run on all through the forenoon with much cheering and jokes, every cowboy doing his best. Whisky Gap Tom put up a clean keen ride on a bay horse called Skyrocket.

When it come my turn and the buckskin horse was throwed in the chute, the band had just struck up a lively tune. It put a new life and spirit in the milling crowd. I saddled him and give my cinches and things a thorough inspection. I tightened my belt, flipped my spur rawls to see they was in action and mounted.

They cut me loose with a yell and I bored in the steel. Old Yeller Fever squealed and commenced to pound the ground with all fours. A crack over the nose with my quirt cinched up his spirit. He moved off in flying, twisting action. He hit the ground and sprung away like a tiger, winding and twisting, squealing and bawling, first into reverse and then ahead. He went up in the air and swapped ends, lit on his hind feet, wheeled and then sunfished.

Gad! He was crooked. It felt like he was tearing loose every muscle I had. I rode on in a blind stagger. I was gripped there and meant to stay. With a limp hand my quirt swung over his head. Now and then, as I caught my balance, I raked him on the side towards the judges.

The whistle blowed for the finish. My twenty seconds was up. The pick-up man never come. He wanted to see it out. After the whistle blowed, I didn't care if I was throwed. I begun to think that was the only way I could get shed of him. He kept right on bucking and plunging ahead.

He hit the fence on the opposite side. I locked my arms around a pole, kicked myself free and let her go. The crowd cheered and yelled. Hats went in the air. Revolvers barked from the J. Bar D. outfit. It was a wild moment! The old man met me in the middle of the ring. He fanned me with his hat. He offered me whisky. I shook my head and walked away with him.

"Boy, you're sure livin' up to the family reputation. The crowd have fell for you. The other riders is whipped."

He told me to take it easy. Anything I wanted was waiting for me at his home. He would rather I'd be away from the crowd on account of trouble starting. It often did among cowmen at a rodeo.

I was pretty well shook up and felt like a churn. Now and then red blurred my eyes, and I went dizzy. Twenty seconds of that riding is enough for any man. I guess I'd went thirty. An hour later found me laying in my room at the old man's home. I slept till the servant brought up my supper on a tray.

The old man come up afterwards and brought some whisky. He told about the good times he'd had with my Dad in the early days. He said he was sure I'd get a square deal the next day. He'd been over and told the judges what a yeller lot they was to allow the Whiskey Gap bunch to enter old Yeller Fever because they figured he couldn't be rode. That way their man would win. He told them he figured them a yeller bunch to crook a kid fighting the game alone. We talked a couple of hours. When he went to bed I whooped up my snore till daylight.

When morning come I was well rested. I fanned the breeze without breakfast. To shake up a heavy meal made a man bilious. That morning I drawed with the bunch.

The three worst horses was picked and put in the corral for the finals. Whisky Tom, a rider from Oregon and myself had qualified. We drawed to these three horses. That's one time they et their own medicine. Whiskey Tom got Yeller Fever. The rider from Oregon got the gray horse I drawed the first day. A black horse fell to me. The whole thing looked funny. I was to ride a fresh horse each day. The ones I'd rode before stood for the finals.

That black horse was a pretty thing. He stepped free and easy like a cat. His coal-black body glistened in the sun. He had an arched neck, with a small intelligent head high in the air. His tail hung like a branch of a weeping willow. There ain't nothing else in the world as graceful. Every muscle in his body showed power and action. He had beautiful, straight legs with a small round hoof. His chest was round and deep. Heavy veins showed over every inch of his body. Any rider would feel proud of a horse like that. I longed for the moment when I would sit him straddle and wave at the crowd.

Riding in the finals was the close of the rodeo to take place about three in the afternoon. The other riders rode for day money as there was no chance left at the big purse. That allowed them to make about twenty-five dollars to the horse.

Three o'clock rolled around. We matched coins to see who rode first. Whisky Tom won first and the rider from Oregon second. I rode last.

Whisky Tom put on a grand-stand play. His Yellow Fever come twisting and winding out of the chute. He waved his hat at the crowd. The crowd cheered him to the limit of their throats. Six-shooters roared and cowboys yelled. It looked like he was winning. Sudden, the old horse turned the corkscrew, swung on his hind feet, sunfished in the air and Whisky Tom joined the birds. He went flying for a sprawl in the dust.

The crowd "Oh-ed!" and "Ah-ed!" The old man cheered and yelled. The boys from the J. Bar D. yelped like coyotes. Tom picked hisself up alone.

The rider from Oregon follered. The gray horse cut loose in full action both ways. He done a good job. Oregon stayed with him, but he loosened a little from his saddle once and changed hands on his hackamore rope. That was enough to disqualify him. The whistle blowed. The pick-up man grabbed him.

The old man was right there on the job. He cheered me by saying, "You got her easy!" It didn't seem like he ever run out of bottles. Right there he sprung a new one on me. I had a small drink while the crowd cheered.

I took plenty of time, saddling and seeing everything was just right. My friends from the ranch was there like brothers. Each one offered a helping hand and spoke in cheerful tones.

"You can do it. Easy, now — watch yerself!"

The old man handed me a heavy parcel. I tore it open. Out rolled a new pair of silver-colored Angora chaps and a lavender muffler. I wound the muffler round my neck and tied it in a free knot, hanging loose over my shoulders. I slipped into the chaps and mounted the fence. I was sure trigged up!

I mounted, taking plenty of time; then I yelled, "Let 'im go!"

The chute door swung back out of my way. I reached his shoulders with my spurs and hit him with my hat. He bolted ahead and snaked towards the grand stand. Then I reached him in the flank with both feet. He raised on his hind feet and shot high into the air, hit the ground springing and then went up again. He was going high and straight with the spring of a monkey. He swapped ends and lit reverse. Off he went in high motion, squealing as he hit the ground. Every time he went up was higher and more graceful.

The white silver chaps against the black shining body was glad medicine to my eye. I was hoping the crowd liked the chaps as well as I did.

I was riding him easy, fanning his head and spurring him on both sides. He come to a halt in front of the judges' stand. The whistle blowed and I jumped off. Loud voices and everything loose went up in the air.

They piled over the grand stand and fences. The old man and the J. Bar D. boys carried me out on their shoulders.

The old man said, "We'll celebrate in some style!"

We went to the saloon. He told them to give us what we wanted and send him the bill. We just naturally took the town over and run it for two days, riding bucking horses and running races right up main street. Everybody that wanted to join us was welcome. Them that was looking for trouble darn sure got it. A few of the soreheads around town got walked on. The old man had piled up a wad of money and he didn't object to us spending some of it for him.

One at a time we trailed back to the ranch. Several of the boys had extra saddles and outfits they'd won from the Whisky Gap bunch. We talked of taking in big rodeos that took place in the north country. They wanted to back me for all they had. I'd already got it in my head that some day they'd wake up and wonder where I'd gone.

My broncs at the ranch had had a few days' rest. They fought me to a dirty finish. The whisky I'd took on wasn't making me feel any too good. The ranch boss come out to the corral. I told him I'd guessed he'd better make out my time, I was going to leave.

He said, "If it's more money you want, I'll give you another raise."

I'd already had two, and was drawing ninety-five at that time. I told him I'd stayed about as long as I ever stayed in any place. There was something in the north country that was pulling me that direction.

"Well, if you insist on it, I guess it'll have to be."

We set down in the corral and figured up. I offered him thirty dollars for the High Power horse and he took it. With what money I had, my rodeo money and my wages, I was about eleven hundred dollars strong.

A few days later I was headed straight north, bound for Canada.

CHAPTER XIX · MY FIRST CANADIAN JOB

A week's travel, keeping away from towns as much as possible, brought me into the great prairie country. I sighted a concrete post about five feet high. On the south side she had U.S., on the north was D.C. I knowed that was the Canadian boundary, so I looked the country over good in every direction.

I'd heard that the Mounted Police patrolled the line. On this heavy grass country a horse never left any tracks. There was no signs of life in sight, so I stood up in my stirrups and fanned the breeze in a high trot. I'd gone into Canada straight north of Great Falls and a little east of Sweet Grass, where the emigration officers stayed.

About an hour's ride brought me up on a high ridge. I was looking at a country that fell to the north. Small winding draws, very smooth and heavily covered with grass, wound through the country, north to the river. Cattle and horses fed lazily. Now and then a wolf or a coyote loped off. I could see in the distance a narrow green strip. It looked like a river about four miles away. It was heavily bordered on both sides with what I guessed was cottonwood trees.

When I hit the river I come to an old ranch where a few lazy cowboys nursed the spring fever, waiting for summer work. They hailed me with a welcome I'd never had before. It felt better than home to me! I was tired of rambling. I inquired for the boss and if they had a bronco fighter on that outfit. They said the boss wouldn't be back for a couple of days and told me to lay around and wait.

When the boss come I hit him up for a job. He asked me if I was a bronco fighter. I told him nothing else but. I had a hankering for bad horses. He asked me where I come from and I told him the Caribou country that lays way up in northern Canada.

They shot me their bad horses first. I had good luck with them. Few of them bucked, but when they did I combed them out for a finish, and I established my claim as a bronco fighter. They called me Bronco Bill. That suited me all right.

When the spring round-up started, they shot me out with fourteen old spoiled horses that nobody else would ride, and four broncs. I headed for the P Cross outfit to represent the Wallace (Hat) outfit that I was working for at their round-up.

It was my job to pick up all the stock that belonged to the Hat outfit as it come in during the round-up and take it back with me when I went. The P Cross had a man over on our outfit doing the same for them.

Next day, when the round-up pulled out, I throwed my horses in the cavy and started on my first Northern round-up. This was something different from anything I'd ever seen. It was a fast outfit and rode long hours. Every man was dog-tired when night come. It was a race from start to finish. The days was long in that country. Daylight broke at three-thirty and it was still light at nine o'clock. That was more sunlight than I'd ever seen in one day.

There was probably fifty hard riders on this outfit. They was a jolly talkative bunch, much different to the Southern cowhand. They told everything they knowed or had seen and made up stories about what they might hear. I didn't like this. I kept my past history to myself.

The feller wasn't joking when he said I had the roughest string of horses in the country. Every time I left camp it was a bucking contest for me. The men got so they would all wait to watch it. Sometimes when I left camp I was as tired as though I'd done a day's work, and I still had to foller the other men for sixteen to eighteen long hours. Some nights I was too tired to sleep.

There wasn't a man on that outfit that didn't try to find out where I was raised. They said it must be a country of bad horses. I told them it was and I was soon going back. The day the round-up was finished I got ready to leave. The P Cross foreman told me there was a job waiting there with more money than I was getting any time I wanted to come back. I pulled up to the Hat ranch about an hour after dark.

I was tired and wore out and raved like an angry bull. I shot the old ranch dog, when he run out yelping to meet me, and frightened my horses back in the opposite way. This brought the boss out with his war clothes on. He wanted to know what I shot the dog for. I told him he was lucky it wasn't him instead of the dog, for a man that would ride that outfit for sixty dollars a month was a fool, and if he didn't like it he could write out my time.

Instead of that he raised me another fifteen. The next morning I never got up till way after breakfast. When I mosied out to the corral, he was standing there waiting. I told him the way the P Cross outfit traveled and I reckoned we had a good gather on the stock in that country.

He wanted to know how I got along with the horses. Now he started something right there!

"I don't reckon there is one of them I hain't kicked the livin' devil out of. I had buck all the time and some in between. I'm growin' an appetite right now for kickin' trouble out of somethin' else besides a horse. If some of these fizzel-faced-half-witted-would-be-bronco-fighters you got around this outfit don't keep their bazoos closed, there'll be some strange faces in hell for breakfast one of these mornings."

"Jest who are you hittin' at?"

"Anybody that wants to take it. If the boot happens to fit, you wear a pair of them, old-timer!"

I turned and waddled off over to the bronco corral, where six head of man-eating, flesh-hungry broncs was standing. I reached over and got my rope, caught one by the front feet and piled him up. I tied his feet and then saddled him, climbed straddle of him in a position to mount as he got up, loosened the rope off his feet and commenced to pound him over the head with it. After he'd done quite a bit of bucking around the corral, knocked down two or three of the other horses and fell down a time or two hisself, I swung off him and went over to the fence. I jerked the leaf out of my prayer book and commenced to bundle up a new life of Bull Durham.

It was right there I felt some more "travel-travel" creep into my old carcass. I roped a bronc, put a hackamore and saddle on him, looked over at the boss, who stood watching through the bars and yelled, "Open that hole the carpenter left in the fence. I want to roll out of here!"

As we come through the gate I reached the bronc in the shoulders with both spurs. I let off about seven Indian warwhoops and bucked off out of sight down into the river timber.

When I come back it was about three o'clock in the afternoon. The rest of the boys had been laying around the ranch. There wasn't much to do. All the stock had been throwed on the summer range. Bronc fighting was about all there was left for a week. While I was gone they'd organized a rock-hauling outfit. They was going to build a big rock farm.

When I seen all them cowboys hauling rocks, that was a new one on me. Says I to myself, "If a cowboy has to haul rocks to live in this country, I'm gittin' further!"

After I come out from dinner I met the boss. He said, "You can go out and help the boys haul rocks for the rest of the day."

"The devil, you bawl out! What do you think I am, a charitable institute? If you think I look like one, you better go have your glasses set again. You're sure seein' things! I wouldn't haul rocks for Gawd-Almighty, sayin' nuthin' about doin' it for a man. Down in my native staumpin' ground they just naturally kill bosses for askin' them kind of questions. I think you'd better make out my time before you run out of checks. You tell the rest of them imitation cowboys that I wished them luck. I'll be gone in twenty minutes. And if it takes too long to write out that check, I'll be in and pile an armful of rocks on your head."

I made for the pasture where old High Power was. He come into the corral, whistling and snorting. I roped him and he sure was some spooky actor. He had the pull-away fever too. I tied the few duds I had in my coat on the back of my saddle, and rode up to the gate that led into the house. There was the boss waiting like a good little boy to hand me my check. I took the check, reached old High Power in the neck and we done a real bit of bucking and pawing up the earth to celebrate.

I wanted to buck him a good-by. That's all I'd had. What I yelled I'm not telling, but that's the way I moved on. If everything was all right I said good-by like a lady. If it was all wrong or half-wrong, I sure left them thinking. I didn't care for nobody or nothing those days. And I wasn't figuring on the day when I would.

I had picked up some tales about cow outfits northwest of there. I lit out to see if they was on the rock pile too. I had left the U. S. to keep from making little ones out of big ones under the warden's direction. This country where free hands took to rocks for summer sport was worth inspecting.

The sun was pouring down pretty hot. The heat waves curled over the low ridges. Now and then a mirage showed in the distance. It made the grass look like it was six feet high. Fence posts looked like a telegraph line and a blue wave traveled over the top of the grass in spots, making it look like water. Greasy fat badgers backed into their holes and snarled at me. I popped a few off for good luck.

That was sure a big open quiet country. No sounds to be heard. Only a prairie bird whistling once and awhile. Big white hares jumped up and loped off. The prairie country raised to the northwest. For miles and miles from every ridge we mounted I expected to see something on the other side. There was nothing but more grass prairies dotted now and then with stock and small marshy lakes.

Way off in the northwest a small black cloud rose — the blackest I'd ever seen. It was traveling right towards me. I don't reckon it was more than twenty-five minutes till I could hear a roar and rumbling noise. I couldn't imagine what it was till a few small hailstones hit me.

Then I remembered the awful hailstorms the cowboys had told about. I knowed I was in for a pounding. I jumped off, jerked my saddle and hobbled old High Power with my lariat, leaving the long end to hold to. I set down and covered my head and shoulders with my saddle and blanket. By that time the hail was hitting me as big as marbles. They kept growing. Old High Power reared and caved under the punishment. By then they was as big as golf balls. They'd hit the ground and bounce four and five feet in the air. They got so thick I couldn't see. Parts of my body was getting well pounded.

There was as much rain falling as there was hail. Inside of fifteen minutes that country was a moving sheet of water. It formed many small lakes in the low grassy pockets. I was soaking wet and my hands stung from the beating of the hail. When it cleared, I seen old High Power about a quarter of a mile away, humped up. He was crazy wild when I got to him, and it took a long time to quieten him down. He had small lumps the size of the end of your thumb all over his body. I was soon saddled and drifting on.

This storm made riding a pleasure. The air was damp and fresh. The water oozed from under the horse's feet as he plodded on. My temper had been pounded down to normal by now. The hail must have beat some of the devil out of me. I was whistling along — glad I was alive!

About sundown I rode onto a sheep herder. He invited me to his camp to feed my horse and have supper. He was a Yankee boy, raised in Sholow, Arizona, and he seemed like a pretty nice feller. He told me he'd been trapping way up in the north country where they used dog teams. He trapped there in the winter time and come south and worked the sheep outfits in the summer. It was a good, easy job to fatten up on. Feed was plentiful and the sheep would almost herd themselves. He got sixty dollars a month and furnished. It was a little bit lonesome at times, but he didn't mind that so much.

He told of the north country where wolves run in packs. Lynx and fox was plentiful. There was a few black and silver fox. Deer and moose was plenty. You could get one within a mile of camp anytime. Caribou run thousands in a herd. It was great sport there in the winter but it got awful cold and the snow fell deep.

I told him I was just knocking around. I would like to go up with him that fall if he didn't mind. We fell in as partners on first sight. He invited me to stick around a week or so with him.

He was a short, heavy-set feller with light hair and big, blue, dreamy eyes. He wasn't neither fast nor slow. Nothing seemed to bother him only meal time. He had a couple of the best Winchester rifles I ever seen. I never stopped to count his hunting knives. They run in bunches. Jim was his name. I was Bronc.

We chummed around and feasted for a week. We had the pick of all the mutton we wanted, hot sour-dough biscuits, fried potatoes, jam, canned fruit and coffee made to order. We'd roll up the sidewalk, cover the moon and push in the stars anytime we felt like it on that job. Sleep was my middle name — and his first.

One morning I saddled up and told him good-by. We agreed to meet that fall at the Calgary stampede. I told him I'd write as soon as I got located. It didn't matter what the name was if there was a cross in the corner; it was me.

CHAPTER XX · A CROOK'S HAVEN

Sundown after a hard day's ride brought me into a drowsy town of about a thousand population. Old men and would-be cow-punchers drolled round the streets. They spent their days whittling and trading horses. At night they told cowboy tales and smutty stories. They rode more broncs setting round the stove than they ever did in the wide open. This was a different type of man than I'd ever seen.

They carried the gay up-hand of the cowboy while congregated in town. When they was out on the range, they was a sorry lot. They talked of games of pool, pretty girls, their neighbors and bawled to be back in town. This was just the place I was hunting!

The game looked easy without any competition. All I had to do was hand them a good slick line of bull about being honest. They'd open their ears and mouth and suck it all in.

I'm telling you I stole everything they had but their voices. Looking around for help, I found a butcher in this town packing a good reputation he underlived. I went in cahoots with him and made beef deliveries by moonlight. He got the inside talk of the town and delivered it to me. We had everything in that town spotted, from riding outfits and beef to cash.

They never once suspected me. I dropped Jim a letter back to the sheep camp, telling him what pickin's I had and I'd soon have money enough to be called "Mister."

I stayed here till it was about time to meet Jim and then pulled out and went on to Calgary — Jim came along in a few days and we proceeded to celebrate. We sobered up about four days after the doings and started to buy supplies for the cold north country. This I left to Jim's judgment. He'd been there before and knowed what was needed.

I hired an old feller to take my horses to his ranch. I paid him a hundred and twenty dollars feed in advance for them, and told him I wanted them to have the best of care. He or anybody else could ride them if they was able to, but I expected the horses ready to travel when I come back.

We took the train to the farthest place north — Elk Point — and hired a feller with some pack horses to take us as far north as he could. That brought us to the fur-trading post of Oakes. Then we started north with dog teams.

Our outfit was piled on four dog sleighs, pulled by six dogs to the sleigh. We tramped alongside. I'd left my boots and took to moccasins. There being no heels on them made traveling different to what it was in boots. The cords pulled and cramped in the back of my legs. Every mile seemed about like ten. The second day I had to ride a ways on the dog sleigh. After that I commenced to get used to it and kept up my end of the trail.

Four days brought us into the deep snow region where game was plentiful. We pitched our tent and paid off the man that owned the dog teams. He went back to the post. We got busy building a log hut out of spruce and moss that we found under the snow at the foot of the trees and hanging to them. The roof was made of small poles covered over with branches and bark. The shack was about ten feet square. We used a small sheet-iron stove for heating and cooking.

It was too cold to make windows without having glass to put in them. On cold days, when we couldn't leave the door open, we had to use a candle. Jim got busy making scent and other kinds of bait. We killed a moose and used many parts of the insides such as the liver, gall and blood to mix with fish for trail scent.

Jim whistled and worked all the time. I watched with a curious eye to learn. Something about this cold free country made a man feel like he owned all of it he could see.

We was trapping wolves, foxes and coyotes mostly. It wasn't much of a trick to catch coyotes and wolves and red, gray and cross fox. These was not of much value.

But the silver and black fox was sure keen. They can scent a man's track quite a distance and won't even cross it unless they are crowded. Then they walk up within six feet of it, make a long high jump, clearing about the same distance on the other side. The only thing they will come for is some kind of queer scent that raises their curiosity.

Jim knowed how to mix this. His concoction was as horrid a mess as the oldest witch could ever bottle and set to work in the heat. The stench in the cabin got so thick the candles was ashamed to burn.

We'd take that scent and sprinkle it around on the bushes near the traps, then wait for a snowfall to cover our tracks. As soon as the man smell was deadened these creatures would venture to the scent. We'd get probably one out of every five that investigated. We had pretty good luck, Jim thought. We bagged ten that season.

You might imagine something awful cold, but that ain't cold enough! A man couldn't use any kind of rifle in that country but a free-action Winchester. Bolt-action rifles and Lugers would get so cold they'd block. It would be impossible to move them until they was warmed up.

Many days it was so still and cold the sky looked clear, but fine frost floated through the air. At times this frost got so thick it was like a fog. A man wouldn't dare to leave camp until it cleared up. Big trees would crack and split. Many would fall with the load of heavy frost on them. Ice on the lakes was from six to seven feet thick.

Men in that part of the country was darned scarce. Once in a while a trapper or a man with a dog team would stop in. Then we would have a regular celebration, cook up the best grub we had in camp, and set up all night and swap yarns. The visitors generally hung over about two days. The main talk was how they set their traps, made their scent, drove dog teams and marketed their pelts.

One morning we hit out for our traps in opposite directions. It was about as bright a day as we ever had. I made a long hard circle through the snow around my traps, and got back to camp just after dark. A couple of hours later Jim hadn't showed up. I commenced to get worried. I feared he'd ventured out too far and got tired, laid down to rest and forgot to get up. Maybe a pack of wolves had overtook him some place. They often done that in that country. Some men had been caught and et up. Others had crawled up in trees, anchored theirselves in the branches and froze to death. I spent all night waiting and building fires. I had plenty of pleasant things to think about.

Daylight come and no Jim. I took his tracks. The wind had blowed in the night and drifted the snow so they was hard to foller. That made it tiresome and anxious going. A man will cover more miles that way than he realizes and sometimes give out before he notices he is even tired.

About three o'clock in the afternoon I struck a place where it looked as though a man had been wallering in the snow. Wabbly short tracks led on from there. By now I knowed something had happened. He'd either froze to death or the wolves had him.

I was getting a little bit tired myself. Knowing I was six hours from camp, I took it easy and watched the country close. The wabbly tracks must have went a half mile. Then they come to a big wallered-down place in the snow that showed many tracks. I looked it over good.

I seen two dim man tracks, partly covered with snow, coming over to where I was standing. They left in the opposite direction. They was close together and made a deep wabbly track. I figured whoever made them must have found Jim there and was carrying him away. I took the trail. It was easy to foller till it hit a wind-beaten ridge. There all tracks was wiped out. I didn't have the least idee in what direction their camp was and night was creeping on danged fast. I got on a high ridge among the timber where I could watch for lights at night.

I built two big fires. That's a trouble sign among outdoor men. I kept them burning bright all night and stayed between them to keep warm. I watched the surrounding country for a camp light. Morning come and no signs. I was commencing to get hungry.

I'd been eating more and oftener than I had in my cowboy days. That cold makes a feller get hungry quicker. I went back to the wind ridge and looked for signs. Nothing stirring! I didn't have the slightest idee which way to go for their camp. It was a real puzzle in my mind where our own camp was.

That country was about two thirds covered with timber. That made it hard to find my way. I was in a jam and a cold one. I wanted to find their camp, but I hated to risk looking for it. Being hungry, I didn't know whether I could make it back to ours without food. I looked for signs of the weather. That soon settled my mind.

Camp for me! A gray heavy fog was traveling down from the north. I knowed a man soon wouldn't be able to see any distance at all. I spotted a place where I thought our camp ought to be and headed that direction, walking slow and careful. About three hours of this and I was getting weak and dizzy. Cold sweat dropped from under my arms. I knowed this sign, so I built me another fire and set down.

I'd just got it to going good when a caribou walked out of the timber, not more than fifty yards from me. Gawd-Almighty! That was my life walking in front of me, if I could take his. I moved slow and careful. I figured that shot meant life or death. I took a dead bead and dropped him in his tracks. I didn't waste no time skinning him — just plugged in and got a chunk of meat.

I was so hungry I could hardly carry it back to the fire! I sliced off a small chunk and et it raw. Other slices I put on the fire. They just flamed and burnt. I took them out, scraped the burnt off and et the inside, where it wasn't so bad.

In ten minutes' time I felt as strong as I ever did. When my fire burned down, I roasted a big piece in the coals, cut off the other hind quarter and hung it on a tree, built two big roaring fires, got in between them and laid down for a couple of hours' nap.

The howling of several wolves woke me. I could tell they was close at hand. I watched and when the first come in sight I clumb up a big tree. The scent of the fresh blood from the caribou had drawed them. At least twenty come running and howling over the ridge. When they struck the caribou they commenced eating. They piled on top of one another, chewing and fighting.

It sure was a bloody scramble! They strung and drug that caribou over the flat till there was nothing left but his back-bone. Then they commenced to gather up the small bits, licking the blood off the snow.

One of them spotted the piece I had hanging in the tree. I thought, "Not to-day, Mr. Wolf." I plugged him. Several more run over. The meat was hung high enough so they had to jump a little to grab it. It was hung through the hamstring to a heavy limb. They couldn't pull it down. Every time one would get a good hold on it, I'd plug him. The other wolves would then tie into him and eat him up. I was having a real circus!

All the same, I kept my eye on the limbs I was setting on to make sure they wouldn't break and let me down among them. A man would last about as long as a snowball in fire among them wolves. I'd killed eight when I realized I only had four shells left. I'd have to save them for emergency.

Eating the caribou and the other dead wolves had filled the pack up. They walked off and set on their haunches in the snow, licking their chops and gazing around.

Many of them spotted me up in the tree. They looked up sideways at me. I told them I wasn't coming down — they could make up their mind to that. That seemed to be all right with them. In an hour they formed a bunch again and trotted off across the country.

The pelts of the dead wolves was so badly tore up I couldn't use them. I clumb down and rebuilt my fires. I warmed up good, shoved some caribou meat in my pockets and left. It was getting late in the day when I struck the old trail heading to camp. I recognized it on first sight, and knowed I had about a mile further to go. I reached the camp just as the sun was turning red. That would be about three-thirty in the afternoon. But it was just two seconds this side of quitting time for me.

I built up a fire in the stove, crawled into bed and went to sleep. It was plumb daylight when I woke up. I didn't know what to do. No signs of Jim. I felt a long ways from home with one more month to go before the man with the dog teams would show up.

After I'd had a good breakfast I made up my mind to find Jim. I tied a few biscuits and some meat in a blanket and put them on my back, filled up one pocket with matches, took about a hundred rounds of ammunition, left a note on the bed, telling where I was going, and hit the snow.

I picked out what I thought to be the direction I'd been the day before, traveling easy, taking my time, watching the country close for any signs of man-life. About four hours of this and I come on top of a high ridge. I picked out the tallest tree I could find and climbed up to look around. Two miles away I saw a thin blue smoke curling up. I decided that was a trapper's camp. I started over there, and about an hour brought me to the cabin.

I hollered, "Hello!"

They come to the door.

"You haven't seen a stray man, have you?"

"We've got one in here and he's danged sick too. We packed him into camp the other day, near froze."

This sounded good to me. I walked in. Jim was setting up in bed, white as a ghost. He smiled a little.

"How did you find this place?"

I told him how I'd been hounding him for three days.

He told how he come to get lost. He had went up around the far end of his traps and got caught in the fog. He'd walked a good many miles, maybe in a circle, for all he knowed, then become tired, laid down and fell off to sleep. When he woke up he was pretty near froze. He tried it again about three more heats. The boys had found him and carried him into camp.

I stayed and chatted with the boys that night. The next day I went back to camp to watch the traps. It sure was lonesome! I thought the time would never pass. I walked around the traps and hunted during the day, always getting home early. At night I busied myself skinning what stuff I'd brought in and stretching the pelts.

Ten days passed before Jim come in. When he did, he was too weak to do anything outside of camp work. This is the first time in my life that I ever appreciated the value of a pal. When the country you're in is hostile, trying to get you, you need a man. However, the dog team finally blew in and drug us back to twenty-four hour time.

We began to hanker for the civilization we was about to crawl up on. When we pulled into Oakes, the trading post, there must have been two hundred trappers and fur dealers there, and at least five hundred dogs.

Jim wanted to lay around there and gamble and drink for a week. I'd had all the cold I wanted, to say nothing of walking enough to do me the rest of my life. Horses with the spring was what I wanted! I urged Jim to go south.

We hired a man to take us with his horses to Elk Point. There everybody had the spring fever. The old nesters commenced to stir around. Three days' travel on the train and she coughed us out on the Calgary station platform. I wanted Jim to go with me, buy a string of saddle horses and travel. He longed for his summer's lay-around with the sheep on the prairies. I wanted to saddle a good horse and ride — I didn't know where to, but just keep moving. I was for getting away from anything that was white and set still.

We spent one night in Calgary, looking her over and having a high time. Next morning I bid Jim good-by as he took the train for the south country. He wanted me to promise him I'd go with him next year to the north country. I told him one winter up there would do me the rest of my life. He said he'd sure enjoyed the winter with me. I said she'd been a good one, even if I did tell a lie. The train whistled, Jim mounted it and faded out of my life forever.

CHAPTER XXI · OLD FRIENDS AND NEW

I was in a hurry for High Power and the saddle. He was about fifteen miles away from me. As I was weaving my way down the sidewalk to keep from bumping into somebody, a heavy hand come between my shoulders and pretty near knocked me down.

A voice rung out, "You old hound, what you doin' with them moccasins on?"

I'll admit I was pretty badly shocked. I didn't realize just what it was. My hand went to my gun in my belt underneath my coat. I seen a big, brown, ugly face smiling at me. I recognized a feller by the name of Mart Tally from old Mexico. He was one of the boys that had helped to fetch Jack in, the time he was butchered by the Mexicans. I was tickled. We must have shook hands for fifteen minutes.

He'd drifted up in that country to get away from the law. He hadn't seen an old friend or acquaintance for so long he forgot he ever had one. I'd spent one eternity setting on white snow. We headed straight for a saloon to get back on location. It took us about two days and a half to do that job.

I found out he had three good horses. I told him about the dreamy bunch of would-be cowmen that lived close to the Canadian border. We decided to throw in cahoots and go there. I hired an old feller with a half-wore-out Ford to take me to my horses.

Old High Power was sure full of wild oats and fat as a fool. I managed to get him in the corral, rope him and saddle him up. He sure done some fighting and pawing around.

That night we put up at a livery stable in Calgary, well known to all the Northern cowboys. Two days traveling south found us in a small Galician settlement. There was a few Americans there. Every one in the town welcomed us. We was invited to a Charity Ball that evening. They give it to benefit a widder woman whose home was burnt down.

The fun started that night. We wore our fancy clothes, decked to the ears with cowboy "artinary." This was a farming country, where cowboys was a curiosity. We done some fancy rope-spinning for them and sung a bunch of cowboy songs. This amused them.

What do they call them grub baskets when they get up and raffle them off? Well, that's what they had. The widder woman got the money. We had a small plenty of money, and we decided to run the baskets up and make the farmer boys pay, if they got them. We'd bid up high and then drop them on them.

Pretty soon a green heart-shaped basket was held up. I told Mart to run it sky high and then take it. These baskets had been selling for about five dollars apiece. Mart hollered fifteen for the first bid. Nobody went higher. When the auctioneer was about to sing "sold," Mart raised it to twenty hisself. The crowd yelled and hollered, staumped on the floor and squealed. Mart took the basket out of the auctioneer's hand and read the small card. The lady answering to the name on it walked up. She was a peach of a looker. Mart introduced hisself. He'd bought hisself a meal and a dame to eat it with.

The auctioneer went on. A red one was held up, heart-shaped like the other. Somebody wanted that one. A voice rung out "Five Dollars," and I raised it to six. He made it six and a half. I made it seven. I thought I must be getting hold of a wallapalooser of a peach of a dame. He raised it seven and a quarter.

"You'll have to do better than that, old boy. No twenty-five cent raise on this. She's worth twenty-five dollars right now."

Everybody looked at me. I guess they was wondering where I'd stole my money. You can bet your life nobody raised that twenty-five. I looked at the ticket, but couldn't read it. I had it up under my nose, scratching my head, when I give it up for a bad job.

"Who's the pretty girl that owns this?"

A tall, well-built Galician girl about thirty-five walked out of the crowd. She had a face nobody but her mother could love. I couldn't figure out what that feller could see in that basket. But I'll be doggied if I wasn't going to find out! I held out one arm. She took it and led me to a bench across the hall.

Right there was where I found out that looks wasn't the only thing a woman had to offer. She couldn't speak over a dozen words of English, but she treated me in a way that made me ashamed. I wished I wasn't so rough. The basket was very neat, the grub clean and tasty. I can see her setting there now, but I can't explain the way she handed me things and the politeness of it. That's the first time I'd ever been shamed down.

The first waltz after the supper belonged to the man that bought the basket. I didn't hardly have enough nerve to start out on that. When she raised to her feet and stood on the floor was no time to quit. Why! I couldn't have quit if I'd wanted to! I stepped up, took hold of her and we started.

She was light on her feet and danced graceful. I noticed many eyes watching her as we went round. She wasn't one of them touch-me-nots — just had good brains, that's all! I wanted to talk to her but didn't know how, even in English, so we glided along in silence.

I thanked her when the dance was over and went to stir up Mart. Now I'll be doggied, if he wasn't snuggled down in one corner of the dance hall, holding hands with his partner. She was just as pleased as he was. I'll admit they didn't make a bad-looking couple.

"Looks like you bought the girl as well as the basket," says I.

The girl nodded her head. "I guess he did!"

I felt like I'd lost another pal. My mind wasn't at ease any more that night. I danced several times with the lady of the red basket. I wasn't in love with her, or nothing like that, but there was something in her friendliness and reserved manner that touched me.

Something had popped out in me that had never been there before. Was it the shaking off of the cold winter? Or was it an unrecognized call of civilization that belonged to me but that I'd never felt before?

When the dance broke up Mart wanted to go on a bit of a party. I didn't feel in that spirit, told him so and went off to bed. The next morning the sun rose on a celebration in that small town. They had ball games, horse racing, foot races and many other stunts.

Mart and I raised the question of bucking horses. We inquired from the boys around town and found out there was a few horses in that country that had unloaded all the farmers. We told them if they'd bring them into town we'd ride them.

About ten head was brought in. The farmer boys agreed to ride the easy ones, if we'd take the bad ones. Well, we had quite a celebration! Some of them bucked pretty hard, while others just crow-hopped around. All of it amused the crowd, as they wasn't used to seeing them.

A dirt-colored old gray snaky one was left to the last. He had a Roman hooked nose like a moose. He was pineared and heavy through the jaws, with a thick neck, a short stout back and clumsy feet and legs. The long hair on his fetlocks drug the ground. He sure was a misfit in that country and showed it.

I and Mart tossed up to see who rode him. He won two out of three and I took the ride. Mart got his black horse and snubbed the gray against the fence and put a blindfold on him. He sure was doing some rearing and cutting up. I managed to get my saddle on him. I pretty near cut him in two with the cinch. This might be the ride of the season. When the horse was ready I turned to the crowd.

"We'll pass the hat. Each man can put in what he likes. The money can be turned to the widder woman that needs help."

I passed the hat through the crowd and made a pretty good collection — about twenty dollars.

I went back to mount the old gray bird. I had a bit of trouble getting on. He wouldn't stand still. Finally I crawled on Mart's horse behind him, jumped and lit straddle of the gray.

He reared and jumped. Mart handed me the hackamore rope. I hit him with my hat. Down through the loose dusty ring we went, squealing and jumping cow-west and crooked.

He sprung seven high crooked jumps right ahead. He went in the air, swapped ends and lit going the other way, sunfishing, twisting, squealing and fighting. Then he reared on his hind feet, sprung into the air and hit the ground with a groan as I spurred him in the neck with my right foot. He throwed up his head and run straight into the crowd. He scattered them in all directions.

He made for a fence on the opposite side of the grounds. It was about six foot high and he raised to jump it. He misjudged it and caught it with his front feet. We both piled up on the other side. He caught my one foot in the stirrup and squeezed it bad.

When he struggled to get up, I grabbed the horn of the saddle, throwed my leg back over and gripped him with all my strength. Up he come, dropped his head and went off into a twisting, squealing, bucking motion. Every time he hit the ground, he groaned. He loosened me a little. Each time he went up, I regained my seat, dug in deeper with my spurs, throwing my feet well ahead to hold my balance.

By this time I was out of breath. Every jar made my lungs hurt. My back ached, my eyes was unsteady. Everything dazzled. I'd like to have quit him, but I didn't dare. My left stirrup was smashed on my foot. By this time Mart was trying to catch him. The gray managed to whirl enough to keep his head away from him. Each time Mart grabbed for the rope he missed him an inch or two.

Again he made a bolt back for the crowd. He cleared the fence as if it hadn't been there. Mart had to ride around through the gate. I was danged well shook up before he got to me. Finally he grabbed the gray, snubbed him to his horse, reached down, loosened my cinch, throwed his arm around my waist, kicked the old gray horse loose and let me down to the ground easy. I fell in a heap.

The crowd rushed me. I started to raise up, but the blood come from my nose and ears. My breath was checked by the gurgle of blood in my throat. I felt weak and exhausted. I laid still. I'd stayed with that fool a good three minutes. I'd had enough!

Mart pried the stirrup loose from my foot. They carried me to a water tap. I drunk a few swallers, then lost my breath and fell back again. The blood poured out of my nose and mouth in streams. They carried me away to a house.

Everything was a dizzy blur. I could hear the rumble of their voices and see them pass me in a jumbled-up jam. Every time I moved my back hurt and my lungs filled up. My breath gurgled as it come out. I could feel they was washing the blood off of me and examining for broken bones.

The old doctor come and shook his head.

"His lungs is tore loose, someway." He turned to Mart and said, "If he's got any folks, you'd better notify them."

Mart told him I didn't have any and he never knowed where I come from. All the rest of the day and night Mart stayed with me.

Women come and went. It seemed like a faint dream. Every time I coughed it meant blood. By morning the bleeding hadn't stopped any. At times I slept for a few moments. I'd smother down from the blood and then wake up. Mart stayed by me all the time. He had a worried look on his face. Many people asked who I was and where I come from. He only shook his head.

About three days passed before the pain quit. Then I et a little, soup and things that went down easy. The women folks of the town brought me many bunches of flowers. I don't suppose there was one hour passed without somebody dropped in to ask what they could do. Mart didn't allow me to talk much. Every thing I done made the blood start again. I was weak and white-feeling by this time.

Mart was getting darned well acquainted in the town. He dropped into conversations with some of the folks. When I got to feeling a little better and was setting around the room, the widder woman and the girl I bought the basket from come in one afternoon. She thanked us for the way we'd helped her out. She tried to say that she was sorry I'd got hurt helping her. Mart told her to never mind that. The basket lady couldn't speak English, so she just smiled approval.

After they left I was in a spell again, the same as the night of the dance. Weakness made it stronger. Mart fixed my bed and laid me down. He told me if I didn't take it easy, I'd be a done man. I laid there half delirious, thinking. Mart left the room.

For hours I tried to sleep. I was got! Something had me I couldn't shake off. I thought of other people, how the widder woman had tried to show her appreciation of the kindness we showed her. The thought of other people being interested in me and caring for me haunted me. Up to this time I'd thought each person traveled his own trail alone.

Mart was sticking to me like a brother. Yet he didn't know who I was or where I'd come from. He'd often brought up the trouble with the Mexicans in the South, how Jack had been butchered up and how the hunger for Mexican blood had stirred the boys. I begun to see none of us was free. We all cared for the other feller. Mart was watching over me as I had watched Jack.

I saw my hunt for Jim in a different light. I knowed now why I'd done it — that long hunt and the battle for my life against the cold and the hunger and the sameness of that north country. I thought daylight would never come, and I was glad when Mart brought my breakfast.

The Galician woman that come in to see me was a tender-hearted sort. The widder woman often come and brought me flowers and nice things to eat. She stayed with me while Mart went out for fresh air and exercise. The words she spoke one day I'll never forget. She said she hated to see a strong, healthy man dwindling away to a white weak piece of helplessness. That's the way she said it in her half-broken English. Her eyes looked hungry. Her hands moved baffled-like. She wanted to help me, but she couldn't.

There was just something about the way her hands moved that reached down into me and got hold. It come to me I could do for myself what she wanted to do for me. This funny idee of any one wanting to do for me helped to put me on my feet. I felt ashamed to see her worrying and all the rest of them fussing. I made up my mind to lay still and do as Mart said. No more restless thrashing around. If it meant anything to them, I'd do my part!

Often as many as twelve dropped in to visit me. The basket girl come often. She'd generally seem pleasant when she first come. She would set and watch for a long while, join in all conversations that was in her own tongue, then leave with a haggard, tear-stained face. I couldn't figure her out.

Mart and his girl was getting along pretty well by this time. She often visited the cabin. His girl was English, and she drummed him all the time about who I was, where I learned to ride, how old I was and where I come from.

Often when the small children brought me presents from their parents, I rewarded them with a piece of change. Big smiles would come on their faces. They'd brighten up and then leave. I growed fond of this. One of the gnawing hungers that had fed on me all my life seemed to be satisfied at last. I don't think I figured it out in them words. As I look back I just remember that I was happy there and quiet-like, as I had never been before. I felt more at home with people. They drawed closer to me.

Soon I was wabbling slow around the town. I didn't dare to move fast, for fear I'd start to cough. A coughing spell always done me up for an hour or so.

That was one time old High Power had it on me. All I could do was stand and tell him what a wonderful rider I was. I was riding him by the town fence, just like the boys in the north country rode their broncs around the stove. High Power had growed to the town by this time. He was a privileged character. He wandered all around, and nobody harmed him or disputed any rights of way. Some way or other, us and our outfits fitted into that town. Every one was ready to share.

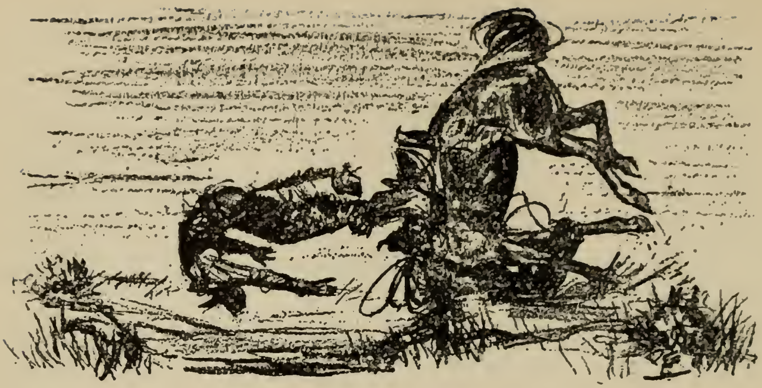
People had learned from Mart that High Power was a bad horse, even worse than the gray. Some talked of it and longed for the day to come when they'd see me riding him. Others warned against it and said it would be my finish.

I was growing to like this life. I had plenty of money and told Mart we'd spend it there. He didn't like to sponge off me, but I insisted. We was pards; what was mine was his. I split my roll fifty up with him.

Each day I growed stronger. Mart had a well-beaten trail off to the northeast corner of town. I didn't know exactly where it led to but had a lingering suspicion. There was a pretty English girl to the other end of it.

I laid around the sunny side of the buildings and on the counters in the stores. I picked up some of the language and watched the people. This town of Vermillion held industrious people. The men worked long hours in the fields. The women milked the cows and raised chickens, gardened and done the housework. There was a daintiness and cleanness about the town. Every one was happy and shoved a prosperous smile up and down the streets.

They was great for amusements, such as small celebrations, dances and parties. Every one was welcome to all of them. The town was too busy to gossip. It was you do as you please, and me do the same. I spent many hours playing with the kids. I'd match foot races among them and then pay the winner. We two just about bought that town out. I think either one could have been elected mayor. Don't you forget we was playing on good behavior and not because it come handy. It was a necessity, because we didn't want to do anything else.



CHAPTER XXII · MATRIMONIAL SWAMPS

As I growed stronger I got restless. I was worrying some about Mart getting bogged down in matrimonial swamps. In my mind that was the closing chapter in any man's life. It was just the end of the good book, that's all. I wasn't hankering to lose Mart this-away!

One day when I felt strong and Mart was gone, I managed to saddle old High Power. For some reason he was gentle. No man can change my mind; that horse sensed there was something wrong. When I crawled on him he walked off quiet and easy. Everybody was surprised when they seen me riding him up and down the roads.

That put a stop to part of my walking. I'd ride him wherever I went. I'd drop my bridle reins and he'd stay there till I come back. When I come to think of it, I believe I and old High Power was both more broke than we ever was before. There was good sporting blood in that animal. When I was rearing for kinks, he give 'em to me!

I wanted to get Mart out of there. I urged him to get ready to leave. One night as he come home I noticed something was wrong. He'd been drinking and had a full jug of whisky with him. He cussed and raved around, walked up and down the floor and drunk more whisky. I grabbed he'd had trouble in his sparking and I used the opportunity.

We planned to leave the next day. It was about noon when we was all saddled up and ready to go. People come from all over town to bid us good-by. They stood around in bunches. Many asked us to stay. They asked if I was able to travel, insisting I'd stay a little longer. I don't reckon any two strangers had ever had a better welcome in that town.

But I sized this up as a golden opportunity. I knowed if we stayed there our money would run out. We couldn't do their kind of work. Naturally we'd go back to the old crooked game. That would ruin us in that country. Why not ride away and leave a good memory! I didn't want to stay and build a bad one of broken faith.

Many hands, hats and hankerchiefs waved us good-by. My basket girl Lilly's went up among them. As we answered with a wave of our hats and rode away, Mart was still drinking. He was traveling well reinforced. I was glad. I hoped he'd drown every memory of the girl he left behind.

We trailed off through the prairie headed towards the Red Deer country. The patches of timber growed smaller and faded out of sight behind us. We was now on the wide-open prairies. The grass was still green, but the small lakes had started to dry up.

Antelope crossed the sky line, as many as seventy-five in a bunch. We never bothered them, only to get enough to eat. Curious coyotes lurked behind and follered us for miles. The larger lakes was covered with sea gulls, ducks, curlews, godwits and stilts.

Mart didn't have much to say. I tried to cheer him up a little. His mind was anchored on the girl. He'd have liked to have went back, but he was too bull-headed for that.

When we hit the Red Deer River we found a wide-open cow country with plenty of saddle horses and fast work. It was the rush season and they was short on cowboys.

We went to work for the first outfit we hit, called the Q. The cowboys was a jolly bunch and good riders. They only knowed what was before their eyes. They never studied signs, trails and men as the Southern cowboy does. Little trouble ever come up among them. When it did it was generally thrashed out in arguments and curses. Their fists and guns they kept to theirselves.

All the gunmen that was in that country had left the Southern States on account of their health and was glad to let their guns cool off. They sure enough was bad men. The others left them alone. It was generally one of them bad fellers that had the foreman's job.

South of the Q, on the Belly River, a bunch of crooks denned up. They specialized in working back and forth across the border. They was connected up with many other bunches working both sides of the line.

The U. S. officers and the Mounted Police had plotted and worked on them for years. They was too closely organized, too shut-mouthed. They worked at night, and no man working on a salary could slip up on them.

One bunch of sixty head of horses they stole from Montana and drifted to the North Saskatchewan River. They left them on the south side of the river, then went over and got an old stallion that was raised on the north side and put him in the bunch to herd them. He naturally wanted to work back to the north. The bunch wanted to come south. That-away he held them. He couldn't force them across on to his old range, but he held them close to the river. That scheme worked out as good as if there'd been a man herding them. There was lots of open range in that country and the old farmers didn't know but what them horses belonged to somebody there. The stallion held them there till the worked-over brands was healed.

We decided to work in with the crooked Denners. But they was leary of us; they was a real organization and it took a long while to work into it. A man had to have real credentials to smoke in that den. The Q and other near-by outfits had already accused us of being a pair of ornery close-mouthed devils. They accused us of being outside line-posts of the Den. We overheard talk to this effect.

Long days of hard riding and hot sun boiled us up. We quit the Q outfit and headed south to what we thought was the central staumping ground of the Denners. We camped on Lingal Coolie, just south of King's Lake. It sure was the middle of the Den. Many riders stopped and give us the once-over. They pried into our "what-abouts." We could tell they'd have felt better if we had moved on.

By this time we had fifteen head of broncos. We spent our time working on them. We always made the curious riders welcome and put ourselves out to help them. A couple of miles east of our camp in a deep pocket was hid an old pole corral. It often showed fresh signs of stock being corraled there, but none was ever found there at daylight. It was a change place. That's where the north and south riders released each other and drifted the stock on.

Late one night I and Mart was setting in front of our tent. A big lazy full moon made the prairies nearly as bright as day. Only the screech of a ground owl or the howl of a coyote disturbed the silence. Suddenly we noticed a dark spot moving towards us from the north skyline about a mile away.

Then the silence was broke with the roar and rumble of a herd of horses pounding the sod. Two riders was hazing them south at full speed. The horses swung and milled in close to our camp. One rider come on high to turn them. As his horse hit the mud on the edge of the creek, it tripped. The rider struck the hard bank on the other side. We heard him yell but knowed better than to go up to him. The other rider milled the horses on past. He missed his partner and come back to see what was wrong. He found his partner's horse standing by the injured rider. He come over and asked for a helping hand.

We went over and carried the boy to our tent. His face was badly bruised and scratched. One deep gash laid just above his ear. He raved and cursed. That's when he let out the secrets of the Den. He kept raving about the Mounted Police being on the trail of these horses and how they'd have to deliver them to the riders from the south and be getting back, and how the boss at the Hawkeye Ranch would be waiting and cussing. The other rider tried to hush him up and kept watching the north sky line.

Finally he said, "You boys already know too much about this deal. A little more won't hurt you. Come and help me corral them horses."

This was just what I was waiting for. I took the hurt man's horse and in about twenty minutes I and the rustler was corraling the horses over to the secret corral. Mart stayed and doctored the sick man.

We waited about thirty minutes when three riders pulled in from the south. They rode up quietly to the corral and looked around and then called three times, spatting their chap legs with an open hand. The Denner knowed the signal and rode over. They talked a few minutes and they called for me to join them. I rode over and helped start the horses out of the corral. Soon the three riders and the horses was burning the trail to the south.

I had watched the horses close as they filed out of the corral. Most of them was rangy-built with a long stride and good action.

I turned to the north rider and said, "If them horses didn't come from the Red Deer, I've forgot all I've ever seen."

At that the rider laughed. "Ain't you the hell-ridin' bronco fighter that rode the Red Deer country for the Q outfit?"

"I ain't nothin' different. I didn't like that gossipin' Sunday-school outfit."

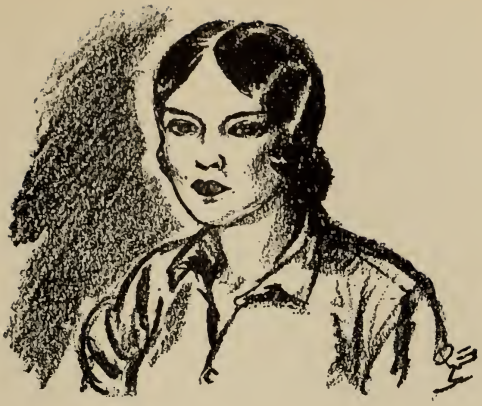
"Guess there's no love lost. A silent member of our outfit that worked in with the Q's said you and yer partner was too danged close-mouthed to be popular."

"Yep. We got a little line of our own and moved down here."

We mosied back to the tent. The injured man had quietened down a little. The Denner arranged with us to take care of his pal and rode away, saying, "I'll see you boys later. Glad to have met you."

Several days brought the rider back to good health. He was a cheerful sort of a cuss. Him and Mart stirred up an old acquaintance. Years before they had both worked for a crooked outfit in old Mexico. This give us a real recommend with the Denners. We was sitting pretty.

A few days later three riders from the Den invited us to move over to the Hawkeye Ranch and join the circle.



CHAPTER XXIII · AN OUTLAW WOMAN

The old feller running this Hawkeye Ranch for an Eastern outfit was stealing the outfit blind. He was as smooth an old barrel as I ever seen. He was dark, with a brown Injin face. His black, quick eyes and high cheekbones showed a strain of Cree Indian blood. The rest of him I took to be English and Irish.

Now that was the place where they was spooky riders after dark. They strolled in quiet, held conversations with the boss and rode away. There was not much life around the place in the daytime. As soon as the dark come the wrong-doing started.

Honest people's horses and cattle and other things they had worked hard for was split and divided up among crooks, then carried or drove to another part of the world. Large bands of horses filled the corrals by night, but was generally gone by daylight.

They never thought of who they harmed. It was the getting and delivering that was on their minds. It was all action, keen-cut and sure. One slip and the entire game was in danger!

One night a bunch of horses was throwed in the corral by a rider that closed the bars and then rode away about ten o'clock. I was to take the horses about forty miles south. That would throw them across the border. I had to hustle to get them there before daylight. I rode hard all night, whipped the horses and cursed. They wouldn't drive, and I was having trouble getting them along. There was a big full moon. Drifting clouds shaded it most of the time.

I cursed aloud, pulled my horse into a walk and rolled a cigarette. The thought came strong to me. "I wonder why a man would do these things. Why do I skulk, sleep in the daytime and miss the sunshine to earn dishonest money?"

The thought danged soon fled. The horses swung off to the east. I made a wild charge and turned them. In a second it was a gay life again, as the pounding of their hoofs come to my ears and I saw the waving of their tails and manes in the moonlight. It was the action in it that got a man; doing jobs that had to be done quick and right.

Daylight found the horses corralled at the marked place. I rode to a small cabin hid in the ravine about two mile away. People was living there — a part of the rustler outfit I hadn't seen yet. I set down on the porch, held my horse and waited for signs of life. I'd dozed off to sleep a little when my horse snorted and jerked on my bridle rein.

A clear, young woman's voice behind me on the porch said, "Good mornin', Mister."

She give me the signs of the outlaw. It was this: she held her hand on her right hip, then slowly brushed her hair back with her left hand. I returned it. Then she told me that over the hill about a hundred yards was a corral. I could tend my horse and by that time breakfast would be ready.

I was dumbfounded. What was a woman of that kind doing there? When I come back to the house breakfast was nearly ready. She just held my eyes. She was a fast cook as most outdoor women are, 'specially them in an outlaw camp. They cooked many meals when they was needed in a hurry. She was clean, neat, moved fast and easy and done things with a good will. She was medium size, well built, had long coal-black hair and big brown eyes that showed a trace of the high strain of Cree Indian. She was about twenty-three years old and good to look at. I set and watched her and wondered who drug her into this.

She watched me pretty close, too. I wondered what was on her mind. She asked me where I was from and then apologized for making the blunder.

After the rest of the men had had breakfast I lingered a little. It was customary for the tired night rider to take everything at his own leisure. I set with my face buried in my hands, leaning over the table.

She stepped to the other side.

"Pardon me, young feller, fer askin' these kind of questions. How old are you? And what are you doing here?"

I told her, "Well, it just happened this-away."

"Well, my advice to you is to leave. Try and find a new game. When you know this one like I do, you'll find out there is more than sunshine in it."

I thanked her kindly, then strolled out of the door.

She called to me, "Please don't tell any of them fellers that I warned you against this outfit."

I told her she could bet on that. I walked away to bed. That bed was a haystack.

It was one of them beautiful red sunsets that you often see in the north country when I woke up, saddled my horse, rode over to the shack and had supper. None of the rustlers was there. We et alone. I don't suppose a dozen words passed between us. I thanked her for her hospitality, walked out, crawled on my horse, and waved her good-by.

Her clear voice called out, "Good luck to you, Boy!"

As I galloped north to the rendezvous, my thoughts glided back to what that outlaw camp held. The men I'd seen there was all pretty well along in years, and of the roughest class. The girl was too young for them. I wondered who she belonged to. Maybe I would never know!

I was back at the Hawk Eye ranch by one o'clock. I rode up in front of the old man's cabin. A dim light showed underneath the curtain. I called to him and he answered, "Did you make it all right, Boy?"

"That's what I went fer — to make it."

"Good."

I never moved for a minute or two. I heard a low voice inside the cabin. I could tell they was talking deep and earnest. I went away to lay in for the night.

Noon the next day the whole place was astir. After I'd had a bite to eat I passed the old man. Not a word was spoke. That told me there was nothing for me to do.

I caught a blue horse I'd got from the Cree Indians and commenced to break him. There was a lot of talking among the men over by the bunk house. I figured I wasn't wanted in on it, so I didn't go near. I knowed from the action there was something wrong.

That night many riders come. Horses whintered and staumped, chewed their bridle bits and fought the hitch racks. Heavy boot heels pounded on the hard walks all night, with the rattle of spurs. Now and then I heard a curse. I lay wondering what the next thing would be. Then I dropped off to sleep. I woke to find I was alone. Not a soul was left in the place. Even my pal Mart was gone.

Seven days of this and no signs of life. The seventh night the old man came back. He told me that he had a trip for me to take on the Lost River, but he'd tell me when to start. Well, that old devil just laid around the house for two more days, then he told me to go to the Lost River camp and wait for further orders. It was about eighty miles east.

Noon the next day found me there. It was a good camp as far as houses, corrals, and other necessities was concerned. It lay in the river bottom among the heavy cottonwoods. The frame house was a five-roomer. Corrals, a shed, granaries, saddle rooms and bronco chutes was built in the sand on the edge of the river.

The door faced south. It yawned at me as I passed it. The heavy shade and the slow movement of the water in the winding river didn't add any high spirit to the place. I rustled about in the kitchen getting me some dinner.

Now here is the funny thing! As I stirred around the house, I felt restless. I was unable to settle my mind to any steady thought. Suddenly I found myself standing with my hand on the knob of the door that led to the next room. I opened the door and walked in. Why I done this I'll never be able to tell. It's a serious thing for a man to prowl through rooms in them houses that don't concern him. He won't often do it. You can't tell what you might run into. Another man's secrets might be hid and trouble might wait for you.

The furniture was upset and strung about the room. Over to the far side on the floor I saw something that looked like a woman. There wasn't much light coming through. The windows was well shaded, so I stepped over a little closer.

I stiffened and turned cold. I recognized the woman that had been over to the south outlaw camp — the one that had warned me about leaving the outfit. She lay on her back with her face straight up. Her throat was cut and laid wide open. Pools of blood lay on both sides. Her long black hair was matted and covered with blood. Bloody hand marks and finger prints stained her white apron. She evidently had put up a fight.

God! The coldness of it! Cutting her throat!

I stood and looked. I couldn't believe my eyes. Finally, I reached down to be sure and moved her hand. I won't never forget the way it felt! I turned hot and then cold. I stepped over and opened the outside door facing east. The light poured in. It made the scene all the more ghastly. I must have stood there a full ten minutes and looked. I didn't know what to do. All the fighting blood and hell in me was stirred at once. Finally I closed the door and walked out. I went to the corral, saddled my tired horse and headed north about twenty miles to another camp to see what could be done.

Late in the afternoon found me at the north camp.

I related the story of what had happened to the boys. Every man looked straight at me and swore. Them that didn't say it, thought it! "This outfit's going to the devil for sure." It seems there'd been a split-up in the south gang. Roaring Bill was the head of it. This girl and her outfit had tried to pull away from him.

A rider headed north to inform the police of what had happened. I got a fresh horse and accompanied by two other fellers, started back. They lagged along behind and talked. I knowed they was hatching up something. About two thirds of the way back they rode up and put their plan to me.

"We'll head east here and then circle in to the place. You go ahead and wait till we come."

I didn't like the idee of this, but said, "I'll try it."

I reached the camp at sundown. I pulled down the window blinds tight and looked my six-shooter over, then set about getting something to eat. I was getting long and gaunt. Often I glanced at the partition door and wondered what that scene in there meant for the future.

Late in the night after I'd et, drunk many cups of coffee and smoked steadily, a whistle sounded at the door. I squared myself around and hollered, "Come in!"

A stranger entered.

"What are you doin' here, Kid?"

"Reckon you know as well as I do, and spit it out. If this is framed for me, read your medicine. I'm ready to take what comes."

We walked into the other room and looked it over. I watched his eyes and his face to see if he'd been there before. I knowed from the slow, cool movement that come over him, the quick flash of his eyes and the set look on his face, that it was new to him.

He turned and said, "God! this is a rotten job!"

He motioned me back into the other room and closed the door. That's the first I noticed that in the blackness of his hair and the shape of his eyes he resembled the dead woman. He asked me to tell him the whole story, which I did. He walked out and closed the door behind him. I set and listened. The champing of bridle bits, clinking of spurs, squeaking of saddles and pounding hoofs of riders going away come to my ears as I set and smoked. In probably three quarters of an hour he come to the door and motioned me out. I stepped out with my hand on my gun.

"Let's go over here and talk where nobody can hear."

I watched him close as he walked out under a big tree next to the river.

"Listen, Boy, I want the description of every man you seen over at the Montana camp."

I told him I wasn't no newspaper nor giving any advice.

"This is a matter of my own curiosity," he said. "There's one or two in that outfit I want. They'll stop lead if I ever catch up with them."

I said, "You know this is a secret outfit and a man's takin' chances and also violatin' the laws of the outfit to speak any word that is not straight business."

He looked at me a long time. "You don't know who I am, or you'd tell me."

"If you want information, speak to the settlers close to there. They can tell you. I'll stay and see this thing through, providin' the boss don't move me somewheres else."

At that we mosied back to the house. He bid me good-by, and shook hands with me.

"If you see that she's fixed up respectable, I'll always owe you accommodation."

At that he turned and walked away. He headed off towards the west where his horse was tied in the brush. I watched the outlines of his back, noted the quick click of his boot heels. I knowed he was gone to git somebody!

I walked in, dragged some bedding out of another room, made my bunk on the floor and rolled in for the night. The other party in that house wasn't much company. It took a while to go to sleep.

Early daylight found me busy at breakfast. I finished, tended my horse and waited. It was nigh on two o'clock in the afternoon when the red coat of a mounted policeman follered by three other riders hove in sight. I didn't know what laid in store for me. Even at that, they looked good.

As they rode up the mounted police called, "Hello, Boy!"

He was a tall, slim feller. Had a face as cold as ice, but he seemed to have lots of brains. He questioned me for full thirty minutes. I recognized the other three riders, but I never let on, and neither did they.

Then we went in to look her over. The policeman walked in first, pulled up the window blinds and looked. His hard face growed soft for once. He scratched his head. The other three fellers looked about, taking the situation in. He called them off to one side and they talked a long time.

I thought he'd at least stay to help or somebody else would come to take her away or bury her, but he mounted his horse and rode off. We watched him fade away. Then we men turned and looked at each other.

"I've been the discoverer of this," I said, "and also the watchman. She ain't been touched and she's in pretty bad shape now. It's up to you fellers to bury her."

Every feller cussed. Danged if he could do it! We set a long while. Finally I propositioned them. I'd figured it out. She was going to have the best that old place could afford.

"If you fellers will dig the grave, I'll make the coffin."

We all got busy. I found an old ax and a hammer, and I had my jackknife. When I commenced to tear boards off the side of the house, one of the boys hollered and asked if I was crazy. I told him that was the best lumber on the place and that's what I intended to use.

The coffin was crudely built, but stout. I had to chop the boards off with the ax. I nailed it together with old nails I pulled from the house. I made it two layers thick. It had to be that-away in order to cover up the cracks.

It was late in the evening when the whole thing was finished. We went in the house, got two of the best blankets and spread them on the floor beside her. We carefully lifted her over on them, wrapped them around her several times, carried her out and put her in the coffin. With two men at each end she was taken to the grave. We put ropes around the coffin and lowered it. As we straightened up and looked, we eyed each other. We was waiting to see if the other was going to say something, but nobody did.

They got busy and throwed the dirt on. After the grave was filled and neatly mounded up, I got a flat board for a headstone and wrote on it:

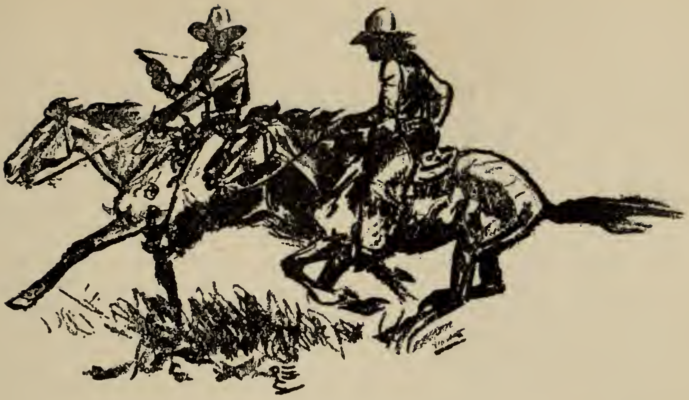
TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN — This lady was found killed at this place. She was a fine looking, dark complected girl of about twenty-three. Large brown eyes and weighed about one hundred and forty pounds. Her name we never knowed. She's been in this country for some time. Her features showed a slight strain of high Cree Indian.

I filled in the dates.

We got busy building a pole fence around the grave. The sun was just setting, the sky was yellow and red. A soft cool breeze blowed from the west. Something about that moment made it so nary a man will ever forget. We walked over to the house. As I glanced back, the red glow of the evening tinted the new grave and fence.

I thought, "She's gone and maybe is better off."

The coolness of that outfit and the wrong-doing of it had started to creep in on me.



CHAPTER XXIV · I'M STAUMPED FREE

A few days later found us bunched at the foot of the Cypress Hills. It was the starting of the famous horse round-up that covered an area of two hundred miles square round the main outfit. Skulkers and scouts worked on the outer edge. This was where brands was changed. A feller might own a horse to-day, but not to-morrow. All slicks — unmarked stuff — was worked over. Skillful practiced hands worked with a crooked branding iron.

The game was so smoothly protected that what honest riders from neighboring outfits joined to represent their outfits never got wise. There was always conversation about trading and buying horses. These honest fellers was sent off in various directions, where they would be sure not to run into anything.

Every man that carried the sign of the outlaw gang was silent and tired. Often they worked all day and all night. If a feller happened to join the outfit that was too smart, somebody soon picked a rumpus with him and he was compelled to leave.

The first night at Wild Horse Lake, supper was well over and punchers lounged around. Some set on the ground against their saddles, others rolled out their beds and laid down to rest. Many restless horses traumped and milled and nickered in the rope corral. Thousands of other horses was held by the night herders half a mile away.

Every man in the outfit seemed at ease. It was a real time for peaceful thoughts, if an outfit like that could have furnished such a thing. Every man lay silent and planned in his own way how he might outdo the other feller. I laid on the east side of the camp. The soft breeze from the west brought short conversations to my ears.

About eleven o'clock everything was silent except for the curses and yells of the tired cowboys who held the milling night herd, the howl of a coyote and now and then the tinkle of a bell on some rider's pet saddle horse.

Suddenly the beat of a horse's hoofs crept in. It was the heavy pound of a horse spurred at full speed, carrying the weight of a man. It come closer and closer then turned and died away. Then come the report of a six-shooter. We all raised up on our elbows. Not a word was spoke. As I glanced over the waiting crowd, every man's jaw was dropped to release his teeth, so that he might hear the faintest sound. Soon another shot answered the first one. Then another. Yells rung out.

The snorting and nickering of horses come first, and then the heavy steady pounding of thousands of running horses on the stampede! As their hoofs beat the heavy sod, they made a rumbling sound like an earthquake.

We was, every man, up in action by this time. Each of us had a night horse tied, all saddled and ready to go. The hullabaloo was started. Many frightened, mad, stampeding horses tore through the camp. As they drawed closer we fell in line ahead of them, working the south side as well as the lead, yelling, shooting and riding — anything to draw the attention of the horses and get their minds off the scare they'd had. It was wild!

That cursed country was full of badger holes filled up with grass. They was impossible for a horse to see in the daytime, let alone at night. You never knowed what time your horse was going down and a few hundred hoofs would beat you into the earth. But little a man thought of that then.

Finally they was headed to the north. Many miles the race kept up with the pounding of the hoofs and the yells of cowboys. You couldn't look into the bunch without seeing where some horse had fell and many others tripped and piled up over him.

I reckon we made fifteen miles of this mad run before we commenced to get them under control. One fool rider was playing the lead about a hundred yards ahead of me. I kept noticing that at times he'd cut in too short on them. I was afraid he'd do that and cut them off. They'd whirl, then, in a different direction.

I yelled, "Take it easy. Where in the hell did you learn to check a stampede?"

He answered, "Take care of yerself and I'll do the same." Not in them words, though!

This made me mad. My blood was up and boiling anyway. If he cut them off too short that laid me and several riders behind in danger of being rushed from the side, knocked down and traumped to death. I jerked my gun and fired at him. It was no worse for me to shoot lead at him than it was for him to shoot crazy horses at me. That's what it meant if he turned them too quick. This checked him and he slowed up.

I spurred and went by him, and he cursed me as I passed. Suddenly that old bally horse I was riding connected up with a badger hole and we both went headlong into the dirt. The last I knowed, many pounding hoofs went over me. It must have been only the edge of the bunch that struck me, for at ten o'clock the next day, wearied thoughts started to ramble through my mind. I realized the stampede was checked, and so was I.

My eyes watered and ached. My throat and lips was dry. I laid in the hot sun on my bunk, probably two hundred feet from the mess wagon. I gathered muddled conversations of the shooting and what had started the stampede. Things come into my mind like a cloudy dream.

Along in the afternoon, when my head had cleared up a little, I heard one of the night riders that was shot through the arm relating the story of the night to the boss. I learned that Roaring Bill — one of the fellers that had chopped off from the outfit during the trouble and the killing of the girl — had pulled in among the ranchers in that country and was letting out the secret of the outfit. He'd told them that most of their horses would be stole and drifted away and how the outfit worked. Them ranchers figured they'd take things over themselves. They'd come, scare the outfit, kill a few riders and stampede the horses. This-away many of their horses might get loose.

But they had got slipped up on. Only one rider had been shot, and that through the arm. Another was grazed across the back. That's all that had happened to the men. The horses had all been held. The ranchers and old Bill had flew off to the north again. Two of the rustlers was appointed to put an end to old Bill's talking.

The next day never brought any pleasure to my part of it. The sun boiled down. My head ached and every part of my body hurt. I was bruised, swollen and scratched. There was no one spot any worse than the other. It was all over and even — just a steady ache. My eyes felt as though they'd jump out of my head. My ears roared; everything rumbled like distant thunder. A few thousand pesky flies took up squatter's rights on my face. My arms was almost too sore to scare them away. They sucked away at the tiny scratches on my face. The days was long in that country in the summer. The sun never set till nine. Eighteen hours of sunshine is more fun to hear about than to lay in.

Every man was busy and paid little attention to me. They brought me three meals a day, but no one offered water between times, or anything else.

I missed Mart. He'd got disgusted with the Denners after the murdering of the outlaw woman and headed back north to his girl in the little Galician village.

I cursed aloud. One of the cowboys got up and come over to my bed. He asked if he could do something. I told him if he wanted to help, to get me out of there. Another day or two of that cursed heat and I'd be insane or sunstruck. He said he'd do the best he could. Soon after he left I dropped to sleep.

The first peep of sunrise woke me. I felt rested but sore and still unable to move around. The cowboy rode to the headquarters ranch. That evening he returned with a buckboard buggy. They made down my bed in the back of it and we spent most of the night getting back to the headquarters ranch.

The old Hawk Eye ranch was as dim and dismal as ever. The other cowboy that had been shot in the arm was there, and the two of us spent many days together. In the meanwhile a settlement and a big sale had been made. Every man in the outfit drawed pay. My lot fell three hundred and fifty. I don't know what the others got. Nobody knowed but the boss.

One of the boys brought in word that old Roaring Bill had been trailed back to Haver, Montana, and had joined the rest of his renegade bunch. But hard luck slipped up on them. A feller had met them with war in his neck, caught them at Stubb's saloon, got into a rumpus and killed about four. Old Roaring Bill got away with a nick. He'd evaporated out of sight for good.

I inquired for the description of the boy that had done the good work. It answered to the feller that come to me the night we found the girl dead — the one that resembled her in some way or other. He'd said he'd get them. I guess he had!

Right there I commenced to think about leaving. All my belongings was at the ranch and my horses too. As soon as I was able to travel, I reckoned I'd be getting further south! One morning when I stepped out I felt that "go-away-breeze." It fanned my ears. It soothed the sore spots. Maybe it was just the idee of traveling again, but I couldn't be gone soon enough!

As the horse wrangler corralled the horses, I saw a dark bay dash through the bars and whistle. He moved like the wind, his head high in the air. His tail stuck straight out. He was a demon — regular road machine. His full name was High Power. He run to the south end of the corral and throwed up his head. I thought I could see a longing in his look for his native land. A feller naturally imagines them kind of things, 'specially when his feet itches for the trail.

I'd done a heap of horse trading on that outfit. That afternoon found me fanning the breeze with four head of horses, — one pack horse and two loose ones. We hit south at a pretty fair click. I'd picked out the best horses for my jaunt and left the rest for the boys. I told the feller at the ranch they all knowed what horses was mine. Anybody could have them that wanted them, as far as I was concerned. I was well mounted and had a comfortable piece of money. It don't have to run up into thousands to make a cowboy rich. The whole world swelled in front of us. It felt like it was mine for the taking.

CHAPTER XXV · THE U. S. AGAIN

High Power's hoof beats had a different sound to what they had had the last few months. As we tilted off towards the south and down onto Milk River I was whistling! Gosh! I felt free! I'd tucked all my gloom and trouble under a big rock on the north side of that boundary line and intended to leave it there. I didn't figure on reforming. My stealing from then on might be on a smaller scale, but it would be done alone!

I had four good saddle horses, lots of grub and a pocket that fairly bulged with greenbacks. I wondered what more an outdoor man would want. Several days of prairie traveling with a slight shortage of water but plenty of feed, pulled us into the Rocky Mountains near the middle of Montana.

Another month faded. A cowboy and four weary horses topped the ridge that looked down on Wind River. I selected a snug camp in the heavy cottonwoods where wood was plenty and water was handy. Already the cool winds of the late fall had swept the country. My horses picked the dry grass from among the dead leaves. I shook my head and said, "Old boys, we'll have oats from now on!"

I rode into Riverton, Wyoming, the next morning with my pack horse. I meant that horse and man in that company would be well fed from then on! My old trouble in that country had died down. It don't take them long to forget things, if there ain't some special person to keep nudging it on. I saw many faces that had watched me ride and win the championship over Whisky Gap Tom. Almost every one recognized me. I had a hearty welcome. Many a cowboy recalled the old reputation of High Power. He was still full of flash and pep, although the signs of a long weary trail marked his ribs. We just naturally bogged down and spent the winter there, eating, sleeping and partying. Whisky was the main guest at all our good times.

As I awoke one morning in early spring, the traumping of my horses outside, waiting for their grain, and the yell of a magpie, reminded me of the days when I was a boy, back among the Indians. My spirit jumped as I thought of it. Hitting the trail again was a cheerful idee at that time of the year. Everything was on the move.

A couple of days later found us bucking the mud trails up the slopes and through the small snowdrifts that was left. My horses was strong, grain-fed and restless. The day couldn't come too soon when I'd look at the old country where I spent my boyhood days with the Indians. Wild horses and free life!

I looked off from the top towards the south. It was a view that was good for the eyes. Some sixty miles away wound Green River. The Brook Cliff Mountains lifted up slowly to timber-line. Way beyond that into Arizona — a distance of three hundred miles — gloomed the hazy Buckskin Mountains. Wild horses and Indians roamed this great north slope. I was going back among them with the free, easy feeling of "I don't care."

About five days of hard, rough traveling through small patches of snow and long slick muddy trails where a horse bogged ankle deep and made the going slow, brought me to the edge of Green River. I was close to the spot where I'd first took up with the Indians. I pitched camp, turned my horses loose, and prepared for at least a week's rest. But there was no long lay-around for me. Wild horses showed up on the south side of the river, trailing in for water. The hunger for action and wild riding cancelled all thoughts of rest. I was out among them again, chasing wild horses during the day to return tired and happy to my camp at night.

Here some of my old Indian friends found me. They strolled in one by one. Some tried to mimic the hoot of the owl. Others went through a slow Sun Dance as they come towards me. Then they'd laugh and set down on their heels to talk.

Several days passed before old Chief White Eagle rode close by my camp. I stepped out and hooted. He whirled and throwed up his hands and howled, "Mike! White Owl, prowler of the night!"

We had a hearty handshake. I felt as though I'd met a long-lost brother. He acted the same.

White Eagle insisted I move back to the Creek Camp and join the old tribe. He said many friends waited me there. I told him I'd be there in two days.

The set time brought me to the Creek Camp just as the sun was setting. I got a hearty welcome, one that will never be forgot. The bucks rose slowly and walked erect and straight towards me. The old squaws ceased their work about their camp fires and waved me a greeting. When my horses was throwed in the pasture, the bucks surrounded me with eager, inquiring faces.

They was waiting for strange stories of distant travel and night riding. Many dirty-faced papooses toddled out. Some was too small to remember me but they'd already grasped the meaning of the friendly meet. They walked up to look and listen. Half-grown boys held my arms and pulled at my waist.

White Eagle had spread the news that I was coming. A big Indian feast was ready. Buckskin and beef, rabbits and other wild game was roasted on the camp fires. We all et long and plenty. When the supper was over, they shifted to the big fire built in the center of the circle formed by the teepees.

They peppered me with questions for a full hour. I told them of some wild times and rides in the north country, of the deep snow and the dog teams, of the rustlers in another land that didn't belong to the big Uncle Sam.

It was hard to get it in their minds that somebody else owned land besides Uncle Sam. They wanted to know why he didn't take his big guns and go get it too. Some of them had seen or heard of cannons and machine guns. They called them wagon guns. With what words they had and the motion of their hands, drawing pictures of wagon wheels and guns on top of them, they tried to show me they understood. But when I'd told them all I could, many of them still shook their heads. They held a blank look as if they couldn't understand.

It was three o'clock in the morning when the big time broke up. Old Chief White Eagle invited me to his teepee for the night, but I shook my head. I give him the sign with my hand that I would sooner be alone.

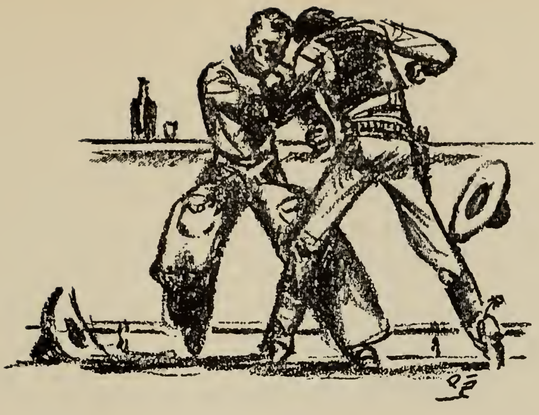
Then he said, "Teesup, teesup," which means "Always, always." I knowed by that he meant I'd always be the same and never change.

As they bade me good-night I hooted like an owl and turned to the winding trail that led through the willows to the creek where my camp was. The Indians cheered me long and loud.

But the old life wasn't what I thought it would be. It seemed all right at first, but I'd growed out of it. Their lazy steady drudge of life held nothing for me. A couple of days was spent in lounging around and telling stories. Then all the bucks and myself packed up and hit for the mountain country. The wild horses was running high at this time of the year, up against the foot of the snow. The mud was deep and the wild horses was weak. This give a grain-fed horse all the advantage. When we talked and moved in action I was thrilled and contented. But the minute action died down, something tugged at me. I wanted to move — take chances and play a high hand.

Several months passed in wild-horse chasing, beef-stealing and other small tricks of the Indians. I dropped into their life in action as though I'd never been out of it. But not in mind. My mind wouldn't settle.

Late that fall I was running short on money. I had horses till everything was shady, but the sale on them was slow. I picked out the good ones, amounting to about twenty head. The rest I branded and turned loose. That give me a perpetual right on any unbranded stuff that I might want to claim in later years in that country. I could claim it was out of my old string. This way I cinched that corner of the horse range as my own.



CHAPTER XXVI · I HEAR OF DAD

I packed and headed northwest to go to work for a big cow outfit. When I struck the ferry across Green River I met up with an old feller who I was well acquainted with when a boy. He'd been part of the Robber's Roost gang, but he didn't recognize me. Right away we started to connect up stories. We talked of many of the riders from the Roost. Some had pulled off alone, took up land and started small, honest cow outfits. Most of the worst in the gang, with much murder over their heads, had drifted to South America for protection. Silver Tip had lingered in the country for years, stealing his way and his living, then faded out. Butch Cassidy had pulled a few high games, and, well-heeled, hit for South America and now lived as a prominent cowman there.

I growed deeply interested. He spoke of an old pal of his that used to be one of the ringleaders of the Roost. He was as good a horseman as ever come down the pike.

A good sport clear through. He went by the name of Pat. He wanted to know if I ever knowed him.

I told him I'd heard a good deal of him and seen him a time or two at Crow Seeps on the San Rafael. I commenced to inquire in a roundabout way what had happened to him, where he went. He told me he was running a big cow outfit for an old feller northwest of there. I found it was the very outfit I was headed for. He told me about Pat losing his family and turning into a riding fool, crookeder than a devil's barrel of snakes. Later he'd hired out to this present outfit as the rough hand, taking up all the bad games, fights and arguments. Now he'd growed away from the crooked line and was living an honest life.

This pleased me. My thoughts quickened towards him. I hadn't forgot the way I loved him when a boy, and longed for the day to come to do as he done. He'd been taken out of my mind and put on the shelf like everything else. Now I determined I'd see him or know the reason why!

The next morning found me hitting the trail with the breeze of new plans and old memories. The next day I pulled up to the ranch. It lay on the creek bottom with heavy cottonwoods and box elders all around. There was many pole corrals and sheds, saddle rooms, barns and bunk houses crowding the edge of the big green meadow.

The ranch foreman greeted me with a welcome and said, "Where're yer headed?"

"Right here and no place else. I wonder if there'd be a chance fer a would-be-cowhand to fall in cahoots with this outfit?"

He said if I'd stick around, the boss would be back in a couple of days.

I did. Them two days passed with lots of fun. There was about twenty cow-punchers there. They was all happy-go-lucky — didn't seem to owe the world anything. The boys talked and laughed and raised fun all the time. I felt out of place. I loved fun, but long training among close-mouthed men had set me into the action of an old man. I decided to shed it, so I went to clowning in earnest. I rode broncos for fun and furnished the laughs for the outfit. There wasn't any kind of question they didn't ask me, but I never talked much on my line.

The second morning at the breakfast table I throwed my eyes on the old man for the first time. He set at the far end of the long table, joking with the boys. He wasn't what I thought he'd be. He'd growed heavy. His movements was stiff and awkward like them of any old rider.

I set towards the far end of the table. Some of the other riders hid me from his view part time. When he did see me, he looked at me with a curious glance. I said nothing. I figured I'd find out all about him before he ever knowed who I was. After breakfast we went to the corral. He come up to me.

"Young duffer, I hear yer lookin' fer work?"

I told him yes.

"What's yer name?"

"Tige," was the answer I give him.

He smiled and looked again. He sure was watching me. Then he went on, "I haven't got very much to do just now."

I said, "You wouldn't worry about that, if you knowed what a little bit it took to keep me busy."

He laughed and hit me a whack on the shoulder.

"I like a man that admits he's lazy. All these other duffers boasts of how hard they work. They hain't any of them raised a sweat since last summer's brandin' round-up." He went on, "Can you ride broncs?"

I told him a little bit.

One of the boys interrupted by saying, "If he can't he'll do till we find one that can."

The old man pointed me out a tall, slim cow-puncher about forty years old that they called Babe.

"You go with that feller. He'll show you what to do. All the saddle horses that's left is broncs and old outlaws. But the boy over there thinks they'll be all right fer you. You go with him down on the south brakes. You'll be gone a month or so."

That string of horses I had was the culls. They was pushed off to one side by everybody on the outfit. They was the bad eggs of that country. They tore down half the timber on the south brakes with me that winter.

We never heard a word from nobody, nor seen a man. We rode hard and gathered and branded wild cows that hung up in the rims where they was missed by the summer round-ups.

When we pulled back to the headquarters ranch the old man was plugging around the house with a slight attack of rheumatism. He wasn't grouchy, but set around, acting crazy and cracking jokes. He didn't have to issue many orders. The spirit of that outfit was every man do his share. You worked hard while it lasted and when you played you did it up right.

Babe had had a long conversation with the old man before he seen me. When I met him at the bunk house I could tell from his line of talk he was well pleased with my work. He eyed me from one side to the other.

Once he said, "Ain't I seen you somewheres before?"

I told him I reckoned he had. I'd kicked all over the globe and punched cows for the J. Bar D outfit in Wyoming. His eyes twinkled.

"Doggie, Kid! I worked for that outfit years ago."

We dropped into a long confab about the man that owned it. I noticed the old man didn't stay at the ranch nights. I learned from the boys he was married and had a small ranch of his own about five miles up the creek.

Now I figured on making a real reputation on this outfit at any cost. As luck had it, a new bunch of horses had been bought in Montana and shipped down. They was a little larger than the average horse in that country and mean and full of action. They figured on breaking them out, then culling the string, pensioning the old ones and selling the bad ones.

The next day the old man put up a proposition. He'd give me a try-out. If I could handle them to suit him, my price was his.

Next morning the horses was corraled and I commenced action. By noon I'd broke two to lead and was riding the first one in the corral. I used my best horseman's skill — worked patient and slow. A mark was what I wanted under the eyes of that old horse-tamer.

He come out and watched me for a long while.

" I like the way you handle them," he said. "You never git in a hurry. You break them a good deal the same as I do."

I smiled and dropped my head. I thought, "I guess there's a reason fer that!"

A couple of days passed. I was slowly working them out in good shape. Every one about the place watched me. Many asked me where I was raised.

"Inside my boots, right behind my face," I told them. The old man had never dreamt who I was, although he eyed me steadily. He was black, heavy-set, short, while I stood tall and slim, light-complected with blue eyes. I was about twenty-two then. In his memory I was a heavy-set boy and stout.

One day we rode up the canyon, talking. When we pulled in sight of the old man's place it was good to look at — a neatly made three-room log house set among some tall poplar trees.

Colts, dogs, cats and other pets come to meet us. What I mean is, there was a homely feeling there. A tall, slim, gray-haired woman stood in the doorway. She had a high forehead, blue beady eyes, a straight jaw and a peaked nose, a long keen neck and a small head. Sounds more like I was describing a crane! Her arms swung freely at her sides when she moved, and she took quick flighty steps. Her jaw moved freely and always. She had a heart as big as an ashcan. She seemed to like to do for anybody. But when you left her, you had to run to keep from hearing her talk about you.

I hadn't no more than landed than she asked me who I was, where I come from, everything but what kind of corn remedy I used. I noticed too she watched me close. She never stopped talking. I couldn't have said much if I'd wanted to.

To listen to her tell it, she knowed a horse from his ears to his coffin joints. Cow-punching and handling stock was a mere item in her life. She was personally acquainted with every outlaw that ever struck the sod and from that on down to scores of congressmen and even the presidents, both past and those to come. She'd done everything from entertain society in New York to digging mesquit roots in old Mexico. By the time dinner was over I was dizzy!

I and the old man rode away silent. I dropped in behind him on the trail, watched him and wondered how he stood it. I had figured on telling who I was. I wasn't so sure I wanted to, now.

A month passed. Most of my broncs was getting gentle. We trailed some beef to the railroad. After we loaded the beef it was late in the evening when we lined up to the bar in an old shacky saloon. The old man treated first. I hadn't drawed any money. I stepped up and told him I wanted a check.

"How much?"

"Two hundred."

"Who'll I make this check to. What's yer name?"

I squared around and looked him in the eye. Then I give him my name in full.

The old man's hand dropped. He straightened up and looked at me. Every man in the house drawed close. They thought I'd named something that spelt trouble. They was all wrong.

The old man was ghostly white and stiff. I smiled and leaned easily on the bar. When his hand come out, I took it. It was limp and unable to grip. He fairly shook. The tears rolled down his brown cheeks. The boys was spellbound. They knowed him and never heard of him having a family before. He tried to speak, but his voice caught and he choked.

It hurt me to think I'd hit him so hard. One of the boys stepped up between us.

"You young devil, leave that old man alone. I'm doin' his fightin'."

At that I hit him. He sprawled across the room. Two more rushed up. They come to a halt as they looked down the barrel of my forty-four. I brushed my hat off with my arm. It fell on the bar.

"If it's trouble you want, I'm hell bent. Now stir it and this will be the hottest saloon in seven States."

The old man stood growed to the spot. The boys halted, waiting for something to break. The old man reached over and shoved down my forty-four.

"No more of that, Son. This family has suffered enough from cold steel."

The word "Son" rung in my ears like an old bell. It was the first time I'd heard it for years. It brought back memories of the race with the stolen Headlight horse. Dad turned slowly.

"All you boys step up and meet my son."

No one in the outfit moved. They couldn't get it through their heads. The old man went on to explain. He related the short story of what our family had been. Finally he growed pale and sick. We helped him to bed. After he snuggled down between the blankets I set on the side of the bed. He took hold of my hand and commenced to talk.

He told of how he'd rode away from the Mormon settlement a wretched, broken-hearted man, robbed of wife and family. Nothing but bitter loneliness rode with him. Only wild life and wrong-doing he thought could blot it out. He had really loved his family even if his actions didn't show it.

For many years he'd wondered where I was at. I was the one of the family that seemed to stick close to him. He'd saw the rest of them occasionally. From their stories, he'd marked me as gone forever. Some time back he'd heard of me being among the Indians. He had asked many of them, but the red devils wouldn't talk. Only grunted and said, "No savee." He gave it up as a story.

I told him how I'd left and where I'd went and that I hadn't seen any of them since. He growed silent and went to sleep. I walked off and hunted up the rest of the bunch. They was in the saloon a-whooping it up. Whisky was what I needed to drown the gloom. My voice soon rang above the rest of the crowd. That's when a man can sound the gayest and act the wildest — when whisky is drowning pain.

It wound up in a halupalootin fight. The feller I'd knocked down had his neck bowed and was bawling loud like a bull. We tangled. It proved to be a free-for-all. Everything loose in the saloon was throwed. Finally the lights went out. Then we mauled and scrambled in the dark. Bottles crashed. Furniture and windows was broke. It was a bloody-looking mess when it quietened. The lights come on and we lined back to the bar. Everything was settled and we all went to bed.

The next day as I set on the corral fence I saw a rider coming on a gray horse. It was Dad's wife. She rode up and dismounted, stuck out her hand in a friendly way and said, "Why didn't you tell your father who you was at first?"

"If things hadn't looked just like they did, I never would have told."

She give me a hearty greeting and welcomed me to their home. After that I often visited them at their place. She treated me like a king.

But soon I gathered from her hints and line of conversation there was something on her mind. She was deep in her way and worked a smooth, underhanded game. The fact was that she'd figured on the old man's property. When I showed up on the scene she got it in her poor pinched head that maybe I wanted some of it.

Slow and sure she built the partition fence between I and the old man, always bringing it around in her underhanded way that I'd been talking of his past life and didn't respect him. "Some one else had always told her!" She really knowed a lot about his life. Her first husband had been a notorious gun-fanner and played on the outside with the Robber's Roost. He'd been shot in the back by a sheriff years before that. She'd got acquainted with the old man, figured he was well fixed and played for his money.

What did I want with the old man's outfit, or anybody else's? I'd get what I wanted for myself!

Things went on about the same at the ranch. The old man often hunted me up and seemed interested in my welfare. I liked his gait. It didn't take long for the old feeling I had for him when a boy to creep back on me.

At times there come a bar against it. I wondered why he hadn't snuk back to his family once in a while to try to do something for them. The way Mother had had to work to support the family stuck in my mind. I held it against him. Outside of that, everything was all right.

He started to show me favors over the other boys. I didn't like it; it caused a feeling. The other fellers accused me of having it easy. I always wanted to do my share. I wasn't afraid of work and asked no favors from any man. I felt better when I took the lead on the hard end of it. If there was any hardships to go through I wanted them myself.

One day I told Dad I didn't want him to show favors, I was able to work hard and that's what I wanted. He appreciated that, and from then on I took my share of the knocks.

CHAPTER XXVII · DAD DEALS A HAND

A couple of old-timers pulled in from Arizona. They'd been links of the Robber's Roost and still follered a small, crooked game. Since they was good hands and had been acquainted with the old man in his days gone by, he put them on.

They was smooth, slick-handed, cool calculators. The way they wove the crookedness into that outfit was so cunning that it had good headway before anybody realized it. Naturally they wrapped the old man in. He didn't like to go against them. They knowed too much about the past!

In the meanwhile a big stock man by the name of Peters come down from the north country. He was wealthy. Himself, nor nobody else really knowed how much he owned in the north. The farmers up there had crowded him on his range, and he was getting short of feed. He come south to look for more range.

As it happened, he throwed in with the two crooks from Arizona and the old man. They put him wise to some open range. They showed him the water holes and helped him file on them. Peters went north and shipped down two thousand head of cattle. The old man was to handle the money for him. The two crooks took on the foreman jobs.

The stock was unloaded at the railroad. With it come plenty of saddle horses and camp outfits.

They all thought I was a stranger in that country — even the old man. The range they took up for Peters happened to be part of my old staumping grounds. I knowed every water hole and bunch of trees better than they did. I seen the crooked game starting, but I said nothing and acted green.

Much of the stock was dimly branded by poor cowhands in the north country. Peters had the reputation of running a cheap outfit. Anything that wore chaps was a cowboy to him.

The trail herd started up the south slope of the mountain to the new range. It was a rough steep country, full of deep canyons and high ledges, heavy timber and underbrush, such as oak and buckbrush. The cattle, being in a strange country, was restless and hard to hold.

About ten days of ragging travel brought us to the top of the mountain. It was a high country near timber line. The snow fell early and deep. That's where it caught us. A blizzard started in the night, and it snowed for four days. The oak brush was thick. The cattle scattered to the four breezes. It snowed about sixteen inches the first twenty-four hours. The wind blowed hard and long.

By the third day of this every man was fagged and chilled to the bone. The old man and the other two old crooks played wise. They rode in the bottom of the draws, where it was easy to go and not dangerous. Us young fellers worked the high steep sidehills. We broke our own trails through the heavy brush. This made the first scatter of the cattle just what the crooks wanted.

About two weeks of cold, hard riding and we throwed the cattle on to West Water. Only two thirds of them was there. Whenever I volunteered to go back and hunt up the remnants, they always gave the excuse that I was needed there. What stuff was left up in the deep snow would be snowed in and dead by now. Their idee was to keep me busy and hold me at the main herd. I noticed how quick they wanted to forget about the lost stuff. I knowed there was something rotten about it so I dropped it.

Some of the small outfits around there had already commenced to talk and work against Peter's outfit, for pulling in on their range. This, too, was just what the crooks wanted. It give them a chance to steal, rebrand, and drive off cattle and lay it onto the other outfits.

The worst crook of the two with the old man was the big, black feller called Joe. He weighed about two hundred pounds. He was a deep thinker who said little. The other was more on the fast order. His name was Buck. He both thought and moved quick and was slicker than a blue clay sidehill after a rain storm.

I played a straight game, acted dumb and never dropped a word. It worked! One day, as I went into town for supplies, I met an old Indian friend called Jack Quaoggit. He'd just come from the Southern Ute reservation. He told me he'd met an outfit driving a bunch of cows over on the other side of the mountain, going in the opposite direction from which we come.

I smelled a rat in a minute, and commenced to inquire about the brands. He told me some carried the *E M* while the others had a *S U*. I questioned him about the riders. There was three of them. He said all was small men, dark-complected of middle age. I knowed in a minute it was a halfway crooked outfit from the Yellow Cat country on the opposite side of the desert. Their name was Luppin.

It was easy enough to figure out now. These fellers had followed up the trail herd. When the snow hit us, they stopped. The old man and the two crooks had pulled off on purpose and left the stray cattle behind. The Luppin outfit picked them up and took them back. They was in cahoots. The whole thing laid plain in my mind. I decided to play a slick game too — act ignorant of what they was doing and go on.

The winter was hard and the snow fell deep. The cattle was fed corn and oil cake, carried out on pack horses and scattered among them. When it broke spring, things looked more favorable. Joe and the old man went to town and run onto a feller looking for work. They hired him, brought him back to camp and left him. They told him to stay there until I come around. He could work with me. They went back to the main ranch. He'd been there a day and a half when I pulled into camp.

As I rode up, he come to the door of the little log cabin we was using for quarters. It was some surprise to both of us! His name was Jack Hish and I'd knowed him in the north country. He worked for the Double Circle outfit in Montana. We had a warm time! He said he'd got into trouble, had had to drift out, and had landed in this country broke and went to work for our outfit.

We set right now to making plans. I mapped out the country, told how the cow outfit happened to be there, who it belonged to and what this outfit that was running it intended to do. We decided to work together.

We done all the spring riding. The old man and Joe merely come over to issue orders and then leave again. One time when I was in town I found out everybody had the impression I was running the outfit. This give me an idee!

The original herd then was down to about one third as many cows as come into the country. Peters was old and didn't care to travel around. All his business was carried on by mail.

I went to watching the outside circle in all directions. I rode way beyond where the cattle strolled, looking for tracks going in and out. One place I struck a trail where about twenty head had been drove. I follered it for fifteen miles.

Finally, I run onto a spotted yearling. It was too poor to foller the herd, had give out and been dropped. It had a worked-over brand on the left ribs. It had been branded with a *S U*. The *S U* had been made into an 800. That told the story.

I continued to watch the outskirts of the range. Jack took up the close work and watched the camp.

One day I was in camp for a change of horses when the old man, Joe and Buck rode in. Right off the bat they started to complain. They said things was going to heck. The cattle wasn't being taken care of right. They was drifting too far out. The country was so big that many of them wouldn't be gathered again. The small outfits around there was working on us. They'd found several places where stuff had been drifted out.

I could see they was planning to lay the blame for stealing on me. Bull-headed and mad, I took the opposite side of the game. If they outwitted me, it would be all right! I wouldn't write and tell old man Peters how they was crooking him. I wouldn't squeal on Dad. Peters could catch his own cattle thieves, but if Dad and his pals crooked me, they'd better watch their step.

They inquired where Jack was. I told them he'd went to town for supplies. He hadn't! I made them believe I was going out to look for a lost horse, left them in camp and headed in the direction Jack was riding. I found him and told him to go into camp all out of breath and tell them I was wanted in town on business. He done so.

A couple of hours later I rode in. Jack come out all excited and told me a feller in town wanted to see me. I saddled a fresh horse and left, saying I'd be back the next evening.

I rode into the timber out of sight in a bee line for town, then swung to the north and off to the oil-shale country, where I found the spotted calf that give out on the trail. In the oil-shale country I struck the tracks of four riders. I follered them carefully. The tracks headed for the creek.

I snuk up till I located the riders, then I tied my horse and crawled close. It was getting near dark by then. One at a time as they milled around the camp fire after dark, I recognized them as the Luppin outfit from the Yellow Cat country. I went back into a heavy patch of timber, wrapped up in my saddle blanket and waited for morning.

When it broke, they rode into the country where Peters' range was, cut out about thirty head of cattle and started them north. I follered them, keeping well under cover. When they reached a big wide-open flat, they built a fire and commenced to work at altering the brands. It was way late in the afternoon when the job was finished and they headed north.

When I reached camp after dark, I found out the old man and Joe had took Jack with them and rode off to the south all day, careful to keep him away from what was going on at the north end. They figured I was in town and wouldn't run on to anything. They commenced talking about the way things had been neglected. The cattle was poor and scattered all over hell's half-acre. I laughed and shouldered the blame.

That night after we got in bed, I told Jack what had happened. They had come over to keep an eye on us and be sure we didn't run onto the Luppin outfit while they stole the cattle and left. Jack cursed.

"They're sure a smooth outfit. If they corral us — when we get loose — we'll shoot the whole stinkin' works!"

The next morning we rode out four abreast, figuring on looking the stuff over good. Joe and the old man made a long talk about wanting to see every hoof that was there and riding hard all day so they could leave the next morning. We soon got wise to their racket. They wasn't half as interested as they acted. When they come to the long heavy timbered points where a few might hide out, they didn't bother about going down through the timber. They rode the smoothest part of the range.

That night at supper they talked like they was more pleased and that everything was fine. They remarked that the loss during the winter time had been pretty heavy. The snow had been deep and many of the cattle had starved to death.

I set beside Jack, and nudged him with my elbow just as he took a mouthful of coffee. He snorted and laughed, blowed coffee all over the table, then raved like a madman and acted as though we wasn't getting along any too good.

The old man informed me I'd been changed from the pay roll of the other outfit over to Peters' pay roll. I acted as though it didn't make any difference. I called for my check while we was talking about it. I figured on keeping settled up close. I might need some money in my pocket any time. I told him I'd like to have my horses brought over. He said he'd bring them the next time he come.

A month later, when they arrived, I was three head short. Two of the good saddle horses and a white stallion of the wild bunch was missing. He said they couldn't locate them anywhere. I thought it danged funny they'd cut out alone, but never urged on any conversation about it.

"Well, what's a horse or two, anyhow!" I says.

After Joe and the old man had left, I and Jack took up their tracks and follered them. We found where they'd joined the Luppin outfit with the stolen cattle and headed north.

Jack looked at me and smiled. "If that old man traps you, I'll kill him as sure as the sun ever shone on this range. As for Joe, I'd like to kill him, just to see him wiggle. They think they're pullin' it pretty smooth. We're runnin' the outfit, they can easily say we was crooked with them, that they knowed nuthin' about it, and we pack the blame!"

As we went towards camp we decided to let the cattle go and spend our time breaking out my horses and watching the trails. Right there I give Jack half of my string. We watched the cow-stealing game go on, laughing at them behind their backs till right up close to Christmas time.

One day Joe, Buck and the old man rode in, awfully excited. That is, they tried to make believe they was. They wanted to know if we was asleep on the job. We told them we didn't think so. The old man put up the big bull story that some feller had got the inside dope that every small outfit in that country had been eating our beef, driving the stuff off in every direction. It was darned funny we hadn't noticed it!

We made them believe we hadn't seen anything that looked suspicious. He said they'd been working over the old brands and he'd sent for a new one. He'd use that from then on. All the stuff would have to be rebranded.

"We'll make a quick round-up on them," he said, "just rebrand the big end of them that's handy to get and catch the rest of them in the spring."

He said the brand was registered in Peters' name. It was a big S on the left thigh. That was a lie! Later on, I found Joe's suitcase in a room in the hotel in town and took the liberty to go through it. I found the brand certificate. On it was the picture of a cow with the red letter S brand marked on the left thigh. It said, "This brand has been registered to Joe. . . ."

I seen now what they figured on. In the matter of another year all the young stuff would be branded with the S and took away. That would give them a clean herd of their own and what cow stuff was left after another summer's stealing wouldn't amount to much. They'd notify Peters that we'd stole the outfit blind, turn the case over to him and then leak out.

We'd be in the pen from one to twenty years, providing they caught us. They knowed under them circumstances we wouldn't go peaceful. There'd be a killing, and we'd have to hit the trail with a murder charge on our hands.

CHAPTER XXVIII · THE HAND IS CALLED

It was well along in the winter. So far it had been a light one. Little snow had fell when I decided to take a vacation. I left Jack on the job, mounted old High Power and headed northwest to the ranch — the Bar Seven Bar that the old man run, where I'd first met him.

There he was honored as a good, honest man and he lived up to it. Little they knowed about what he carried on in the south. My welcome to the old place was cold. The boys greeted me in a quick short way. I sure felt unnecessary.

I wanted to find out what line of stuff had been handed to them. I found out! I'd been accused of playing crooked with Peters' outfit. This hurt. Again I felt the cold gloom creeping into me. I'd played square and this was the pay!

I decided to ride up and interview the old lady. She welcomed me like a long-lost son. Nothing was too good for me. Then her smooth tongue went to rattling. I looked on her like you would a snake, but never let on or dropped a word. I saw the whole thing then! She was the nigger in the woodpile. She was the one that had packed the stories to the boys, wrapped the old man up in her cunning and handled him as you would a child.

She made lunch for me and invited me several times to come more often. Her main conversation was how well the old man was getting along, how everybody respected him and that she'd hate to see anybody throw a disgrace on him.

She was a black-mouthed old liar! She knowed the two rustlers from Arizona and that them and the old man was stealing the outfit blind, and that they had a ranch of their own on Pleasant Creek, and a man hired to run it. I believe to this day that she helped to plan to lay the blame on me. Maybe she brung the two crooks in from Arizona in the first place.

I rode off, wondering if there was any justice in a world where such carryings on as this would be permitted! I knowed why the old man had acted this way. But still it stuck in my craw. I couldn't figure out why he was so weak.

I had come to love him as a father again and had led a straight life to make him proud of me. But he'd turned! I growed more bitter as I thought it over. I was colder against him than ever before. I had come back to measure him as a man. I wanted to take that with me into my life. All my memories was pounding through me. A feller must feel he belongs to something worth packing a name for. Nothing but dishonor hung on my name. I'd shed it! For the first time, I was plumb glad Mother had made her get-away. She never could have dreamed what was happening now. And she never would know!

I headed back to the cow outfit without looking up the old man or any one else. A week or so later the old man and his two crooked side-kicks rode into our camp.

Jack said, "I wonder what they got on their minds this time?"

They acted as though everything was lovely. The next morning they commenced to make plans for the rest of the winter. They wanted to cut down the string of saddle horses. They said each man should have two horses and feed them good, and I should take the rest over on Bitter Creek for the winter.

I started off with the horses about noon. About three-thirty it started to blizzard. The snow piled down from the north. When I struck the cedar ridge country a man couldn't tell his direction or nothing else. I built a fire and settled down for the night. It was bitter cold. The snow whipped me all night. The pine trees shook and howled. The fire flickered and burned unsteady. I walked around it all night. When daylight come, the storm quit. It turned still and cold. I gathered up my horses and hit the trail.

That evening I come to Bitter Creek, put the horses in the pasture, tied my saddle horse in the stable and went in for the night. There was plenty of grub stored there.

This was the outpost of the Bar Seven Bar cow ranch, where some of the line riders stayed. The next morning when I went out, my saddle horse was sick. I was forced to spend three more days in that lonesome old one-room shack.

On my way back I took the opposite direction. I went around by town to avoid the hard riding in the deep snow on the ridge, and put up at the hotel. Next morning before daylight I fed my horse. On my way back to the hotel, Jack rode up to me.

"What the hell you doin' here?" I asked.

"The old man and them picked a quarrel with me," he said. "I sassed the three of them and told them what they was, pulled my gun and cornered them up. I had to leave."

I seen in a minute that was what they had wanted him to do. I knowed the game must be getting hot. They wanted me alone.

I said, "I'll jest go out and call their rotten hand."

I had breakfast and made for the Peters' camp. I told Jack to wait there until I come back. I went bazooing and looking for trouble. It was a little uphill all the way. A stinging breeze hit my face. My face growed hot and burned. I stood up in my stirrups and leaned ahead. I throwed the miles behind me in a hurry. I rode up to the cabin, dismounted, jerked the door open and hollered:

"If any of you cowardly curs is in there — come out."

No answer. I jerked my gun and looked in. Everything was silent. The first thing I done was to scrape in the fireplace. It was black out. Nobody had been there during the night.

After I tended my horse, I come back and cooked lunch. The shack was a dismal low-roofed affair, built of cedar posts set on the stockade plan. There was no windows. The door furnished the only light. It was quiet outside. Everything was covered with snow. I et and then set down to think. The more I figured, the less I got out of it. What was I doing there? After all was done, what did it amount to? The thought of the old man and the two crooks brought more black spots and hell to the picture. At times, I thought I'd get up and go find them, start a shooting fracas and end it all. But that wouldn't do any good. The more I stirred it, the rottener it got.

When it come dark I closed the door. The flicker of the big fireplace lit the room in streaks. When it died down, it was quite dark. I set before the fireplace on a pile of sacked oats. Slowly I become tired and dropped off to sleep. Late in the night the fire went out. It growed cold, and I woke up chilled. I crawled into bed and cursed everything around. Daylight was just breaking as I clumb out, made some breakfast and prepared to leave.

I left a note on the table.

> Jest come back to get my time. I'm quitting because you had trouble with Jack. I know the game you're pulling. The cow thieving from this outfit was done

by your own hands. I'll be in town waiting and an early settlement will save you trouble.

Tige.

That evening brought me into town. There I gathered many stories and rumors of what was taking place. Everybody give me cold, black looks. About three days of this and the old man and his pals come into town.

I met them at the barn. I told them I wanted my time. They put up a smooth story and wanted to know what had got wrong with me. I told them not to argue one more damn word, but to make my time out in full. They took me at my word and got busy figuring. They handed me a check. She read about one hundred dollars too much. I tore it up and handed it back.

"I asked for a correct settlement. Yer're not buyin' me off."

At that the old man wrote another one. It was three hundred and ten. I shoved it in my pocket and walked out of the barn. I called back to them, "I'm stoppin' at the hotel and there won't be room there for you."

That night Joe come down. He sent a man in to tell me he wanted to talk to me. I met him and we talked. His line was for me to come back and play in with them. I could have an equal share.

"I should say not! I've never heard of such a rotten, low-down deal. I may be crooked, but I ain't yer low. The best thing the old man can do is keep out of my sight."

He told me they'd frame me and lay it all on me. The law would get after me for cow stealing, and they'd implicate me in the killing of a rancher on Green River. Right there I knowed I'd broke up their game. If I quit they was short a goat.

I just grinned at him, told him to shut his mouth, and that I'd be waiting there with lead. If they monkeyed with me they was just committing suicide. I turned and walked off, letting him talk. The next morning I met them all three again at the barn.

The old man said, "Good mornin'."

I boiled over, walked up and shook my fist on his nose. "Fer two cents I'd break yer face."

The other two fellers stepped up. Jack interrupted with a forty-four in each hand.

He said, "The only way fer you to save yer lives is to keep yer crooked mouths shut."

The old man started in a smooth palavering way. "What kind of a disgrace would this throw on yer mother?"

As he spoke her name I slapped my hand over his mouth. "Don't crowd me to this. It's bad enough the way it is. If you ever utter her name again, I'll kill you, so help me!"

He started to speak. I tapped him on the nose with my forty-four handle.

"If you speak one word of any kind I'll smash yer brains all over the place."

I stepped back. Him and the other two crooks rustled their horses out of the barn and rode away.

I don't believe there is any kind of trouble that is as deep and as full of grim hell as that between a father and a son.

I wanted a new name. I wanted to be a stranger in a new country! I figured that when it's time for a feller to quit a country, chance buys his ticket out. He goes! I was done forever with that spot and all it held of me! Next day I headed southwest.

CHAPTER XXIX · MOTHER

As I dropped off into a warm Southern climate, it was already summer. The people hustled about their work. None seemed to have any particular aim in life. They was satisfied just being alive. When their day's work was done they dropped everything. Their minds rested.

I liked the feeling of honesty and peace that hung over that country. The small outfits was different to any I'd seen. They was honest. Each man helped the other. Before I realized it I was traveling in the same swing.

I wanted peace and friends. I wanted to come and go where I pleased without watching a shadowed trail. I didn't want to have to watch the other feller and hubbub my mind by thinking he was trying to underground me.

It was there I met an old friend of my mother's. I inquired of her whereabouts. He said she was married again and had a family. He didn't know how many. They had moved to Canada. They'd often talked about a boy they lost and never expected to see again. Then I told him who

I was and if he'd give me her address I'd be there as soon as possible.

A couple of days later I turned old High Power and my pack horse loose on the summer range near the top of the mountain. I bought a railroad ticket that looked like a paper highway. It was a five-day trip, but I just couldn't figure how I'd live to the end of it.

I unloaded in a small town in Canada twenty miles from my destination and rented a horse from a livery man. I'd checked my saddle and outfit on my ticket. As I unrolled it on the depot platform my hands moved fast, as though running a race. I caught myself. I wondered what the rush was!

I inquired from an old man that knowed Mother's outfit. He told me the road and I fanned the breeze. It seemed good to be riding over the Canadian grass again.

The sun was just setting red in the west as I dismounted in front of Mother's door. The house faced the east. The heavy grassy dooryard sloped off to the south. A big, neatly made barn stood against the southern sky as though it challenged all winds and storms that might come to break down its shelter for the contented animals that was grazing in the green, cool pastures.

A soft breeze come from the west, fragrant and sweet. The deep blue skies in the north was streaked with red flame. Way off to the south, where the level prairie stretched for hundreds of miles, dotted with farms and ranches, the red glow fell. My heart beat fast. I lifted my hat and straightened. Then I hollered. My half-sisters appeared in the door. I thought I must have the wrong place, they was so many of them. Just then my mother come out. I'd recognize her among a million people.

She looked exactly the same, but a few lines on her face marked the years and trouble. She give me a couple of glances, then her hands went up in the air, and she screamed. She run to where I was standing about ten steps away, stopped short in front of me, looked straight at me and her eyes filled with tears. She throwed her arms around my neck and fell limp against me.

I caught her, or I believe she'd have fell. My sisters stood with wide-open, serious eyes. They didn't know who I was and couldn't understand. When Mother regained control of herself, she tried to speak. The words choked her and she sobbed. I helped her to the house and seated her in a chair.

She made me acquainted with my half-sisters. She stroked her forehead many times, saying, "Is this true, or am I dreamin'?" It was a full hour before she quietened and seemed to realize it was true.

My brother's footsteps sounded at the door. I raised as I would to meet a stranger. He looked at me with searching eyes, but never recognized me. Neither one of us spoke.

I glanced at his high forehead and dark-brown eyes. There was the perfect picture of Dad. I stuck out my hand. A cold chill run over me. He carried the resemblance I hated so bitterly. He was medium highth and well built. His face carried an everlasting smile. His eyes took everything in with a slow searching gaze. He moved easy but not too fast.

That evening we had a hearty supper prepared by Mother. We talked way into the morning. They tried hard to pry into my past life, but I refused to tell them. I told them in a short way I'd had a little trouble with the old man, but not what it was about. Right from then on, I figured on living different. They could take me as I stood. My background would stand as it was, and untold.

I growed fond of my half-sisters. They tied to me as a real brother. In a few days I got a job punching cows for the Hat outfit close by. That made it possible for me to visit my folks often.

Things rolled on smooth until early fall. I'd been palling around quite a bit with a couple of crooks that was married and had families. I thought stealing was all right for them as their children reaped the benefit. I often throwed things their way. Of course the surrounding neighborhood thought we was in together.

A few beef had been stole during each summer the past two years. The Canadian government attached a detective to their trail. He worked in that country for the Bar N outfit. No one ever suspicioned who he was at the time. He had a few men on his black list and I was one of the number.

One day the owner of one of the outfits they had stole some beef from rode up to me. He told me he'd gathered evidence around the country enough to know all about one of the stolen cows and that two other parties had told him I wasn't implicated, but was there at the time and knowed all about it. As soon as the round-up was over he was going to swear out a warrant. He wanted to know if I'd go as a witness against them. I said I'd be glad to. All he had to do was name the day. I knowed when that day come I wouldn't be there.

Another outfit already held a charge against me for the killing of five thoroughbred bulls that had trespassed among another breed on the Hat outfit's range. It was true. I'd killed the bulls. But nobody had seen me do it!

Cow-punchers was scarce in that country and they figured on letting me go till after the round-up. As soon as it closed, I'd be picked up. A friend of mine put me wise to this. I knowed just to the day how long I'd be safe in that country.

Instead of pulling in with the round-up, I quit the night before it ended. I drawed my time and rode fast and easy to where the two crooks was that had been accused of stealing the beef. I told them the story. It nearly knocked them off their feet. We figured it out that they couldn't convict them without my statement. They asked me to leave. I could do them no good on the witness stand. I'd be cross-questioned and maybe they'd get something out of me.

I told them for the sake of their families I'd go. They said if they ever got the money, they'd give me five hundred dollars. I told them their good will was worth more than their money. Besides, I didn't need it. But only under one condition I'd leave. It was that they would bow their backs and go to work, try to lift their old reputation and be something for their families to look up to. They promised they'd try it.

Again I cast the shadow of a horse and a rider headed south at full speed in the moonlight. I had some checks I had to cash. There was no way of doing it without my personal appearance at the bank. I knowed the Mounted Police would already be waiting for me in town, but I had to take the chance.

Noon the next day I rode into their small town that was protected by the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. That big high-palootin' name always did tickle me. I figured them just a bunch of old coffee-coolers.

I'd no more than landed till a boy friend of mine walked up and told me to duck. The Mounted Police had been inquiring for me. I thanked him, turned and went straight to the bank. I walked in, cashed my checks, went over to the window and looked out. I lounged around as though I was waiting for somebody. I saw the Mounted Police in his red jacket walking up the sidewalk away from the bank. When he turned a corner out of sight, I went straight across the street to a Chinese restaurant and ordered dinner.

I'd just nicely finished when I seen the Police out in front. I stepped back into the folds of a heavy curtain that hung across the entrance of a booth in the restaurant. The men was all lounging along the counter, talking. The Police stepped in, looked them all over. He brushed past me as he walked back and examined the kitchen. Then he looked the men over again, stepped up to the counter and bought a cigar. When his back was turned I stepped into the crowd.

He was looking for something, all right! His face showed he was studying. I kept behind the other fellers. I knowed if I made my get-away, it would have to be quick.

He turned and started towards the door. I fell close in behind him and follered. He opened the door, realized somebody was behind him and without looking back, held it open till my hand touched it. He stepped out. I follered behind.

As luck would have it, he turned up the sidewalk. I follered close and turned quick in the opposite direction. Slowly we put the yards between us. If he'd ever once looked back, he'd have got me!

A feller I knowed was going down across the line to Browning, Montana, to work. His name was Eric. I told him I'd like to go with him. They was after me and what I needed was a quick get-away. I unsaddled my horse and turned him loose, throwed my saddle in his car, stepped in and we was gone. As we went out we passed the Mounted Police still burning the sidewalks with his hot feet.

He was as dumb as most of them and overlooked us. You've all heard the old story about Mounted Police — how they hound a man into hell and back, staying on his trail all alone till they git him. That was in the days went by. The Mounted Police of this day was nothing but a bunch of humbuggers, living on the reputation of the first Mounted Police.

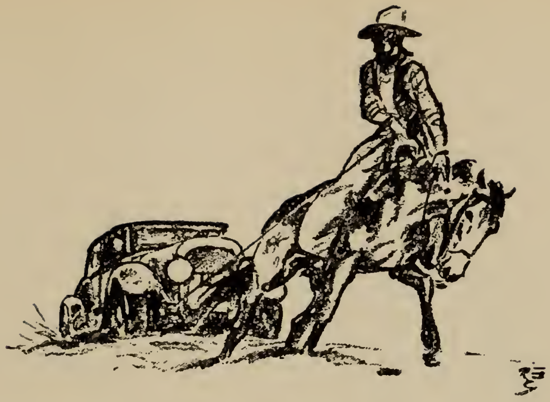
The first ones was real men and have most all passed away. Nine out of ten of them was cowboys and outlaws that had to move out of the United States.

The second crop of the Mounted Police that hatched was would-be-scare-devils. They'd sell out for a five-dollar bill, and go blind for a ten. They was making Canada one happy hunting ground for every bad man the U. S. wanted to shed.

We drove fast. The boundary line laid forty miles away. We wanted to make it before they got word to the line and stopped us crossing.

The two towns was built the same as one. Only the boundary line divided them. Coots was the Canadian half, and Sweet Grass was the U. S.

Our plan was all set before we got there. I jumped out of the car when we entered the edge of the town, mosied around and crossed the line in the outskirts. Eric went to the customs office, since they had nothing on him, made arrangements to cross, paid the duty on the car, and I met him as he pulled out of Sweet Grass headed South. About a half a mile out of town we looked back and saw a big red car we knowed belonged to the Mounted Police pull up to the customs office. I grinned and said, "It's too late, boys!"



CHAPTER XXX · HIGH POWER

A few days later in Pocatella, Idaho, Eric got a job working for an automobile company. I took the train for the South, where I'd left old High Power. I was tired in both body and mind. I hankered for rest, somewheres, alone with peace and sunshine. I might have knowed even the hills wouldn't give me this no more. I was restless. Everywhere I turned was trouble. I wanted to belong to something or somebody. I couldn't shed my past. Bad luck follered me everywheres. I tried to do what was right but my fingers didn't seem to know how. Either I was crooked or somebody crooked me on every deal.

I was coming twenty-four. I hadn't yet figured what the grand racket of this here life was about. I sure didn't want to belong to the old man. My mother's life was full of good things; I didn't want to put black spots in it. If I walked into a hothouse it would turn to an ice plant before I left. Old High Power's disposition and mine was about the same. We was just two orphans the world didn't want.

About a week later I was riding up the slope of the mountain to find him. I spent several days hunting. I was about to give it up when I rode through the heavy brush into a small opening. There he laid!

It looked as though the deep snow had caught him. He'd finished up his days with starvation and cold. I could tell by his round hoofs, slightly stubbed on the toe, it was him. His bones laid bleached and white. Bits of dried brown hide covered the spot.

This hit me hard. For his very cussedness I loved him. There was lots of good in him, but it took the devil in me to get it out. As I set looking at him, I reckoned he wouldn't need me any more. He was freer than I was. If my bones had been there in the same spot, I wouldn't have cared.

A snort and a whistle come from the brush. My white-and-black pinto stallion with his mane and tail flying to the wind dashed through the opening in the timber. The beat of his hoofs growed fainter and fainter, till they was lost in the canyon below. That cheered me up. My spirit jumped and I mounted. I went on a mad chase after the only thing I owned in the world.

The pinto horse had wintered through the deep snow, and was as wild as ever. I follered down the canyon for miles and caught sight of him as he mounted the ridge on the other side. Then I lost him in the timber. Late that afternoon I picked up his tracks, I follered, headed in the direction of the valley below. As it come dark, he mixed with a bunch of horses that belonged to the farmers. I knowed he'd stay with them.

I built a fire and waited till morning. When I jumped the hunch he whistled and run off, made a circle of about a mile and come back. He made many of them circles, each one growing smaller as I slowly moved the herd towards town. He quietened and fell in with the rest.

I corraled them on the edge of town, rode in and roped him. He fought the rope and squealed like a tiger. Once he found he was caught he calmed down, remembering the training he'd had. I saddled him, kicked the others out of the corral, mounted and rode quietly off. His ears moved back and forth. Every nerve in his body twitched with excitement. He was a pleasure to ride as he stepped down the road. I bought another pack horse from the old feller that had kept my pack outfits while I was away.

Now I was moving, just because I was alive and that was what I'd always done. I wasn't bitter. I didn't want to die, but I just didn't care if I did. I loved everything the world held but man. Many of them I had deep grudges against. But I wouldn't go hunting them. What men I come in contact with, I watched and studied, always expecting something crooked to pop out. I sneered at the thought of there being a real honest man.

Women folks had never entered my life. I respected them. I held them as the highest thing on earth. Even them women I'd seen in Chicago I held above men. I laid their downfall to man. I hadn't never thought of belonging to a woman. They was just different to what I knowed. They belonged to another world. I found that out with Lilly — the one I'd met in Canada, the basket girl that had shamed me down. I knowed it would be a mistake to invite her or the like of her into the life I led.

A couple of days later I was climbing up the slope of a high range of mountains that divided two great countries. It had been storming. The mud was deep.

A quarter of a mile from the top I come on a car stuck in the mud. I offered my assistance. The feller told me he could make it if he just got out of that one mudhole. I tied my lasso rope on the front end of his car. We figured with the horse pulling and the help of the engine we'd get him out. He said if we got out of the mudhole to drop my rope. He'd keep going till he got to the top. There he'd wait for me.

He started his engine, and I spurred my old horse. He scratched and pulled like a tiger. Finally the car started. In about two hundred feet the car was making it alone. I throwed the rope up over the top and let loose of it.

When he reached the top, instead of stopping he kept on going, taking my rope with him. The road was good on the other side, and he made time! When I reached the top, nothing was in sight but his tracks. The stealing of my rope was the pay I'd got for pulling him out. The loss of my rope at that time might mean an awful lot to me if bad luck fell my way. The car driver never thought of that.

The climb had been a long one. I stopped, turned my horses loose, made dinner and rested for two or three hours. I set on the ground leaning back against my saddle, watching this beautiful country.

It spread out to the east for miles and miles, where a lofty snow-peaked mountain rose above timber line. Around the base of it was a blue streak of heavy pines and broken country.

Off to the south laid another mountain, somewhat different. It was covered with a blue Indian haze, flat-topped, heavily timbered from one end to the other. Deep gorges and high shaggy points gutted its sides. It looked like a great monster asleep under a blue silence. Not the slightest thing drawed you to it. It was secret and dangerous. Its flat top cut the sky in a straight ugly line.

A great colored mountain rose in the north — red, blue and yellow sandrock. Many small lakes glistened and throwed up the reflection of the sun, broken by purple shadows. Heavy rough patches of timber added to its beauty. It drawed me. I wanted to get close. I wondered if I was imagining all that color. I knowed something of what that red broken-up country might look like. The Sun Dance of the Utes was held in a country of red sandstone. But the Devil's Playground was a picture without color compared to this.

Between these great mountains laid a long narrow green valley. Small farms and pastures cut it up like a checkerboard. The clouds drifting over it moved shadows across the land, like checkers jumping for a gain on this great board. It laid two thousand feet below me.

I was on top of the world! Man didn't figure in this picture. I felt too small to even whistle. The great silence hurt my eardrums. It was all sky, color and distance!

I wondered why that ugly bit of man's wrong-doing should meet me at the gate to this beauty. I wondered what part it had to play in it, what right it had there. It was a small thing, something a man on the road don't stop to figure on much. But, somehow it stuck into me.

As I look back at it now I can see he was just the type of all the human beings camped in that country. That country is too big. It frightens man. It burns him up. It turns him to little tricks of his own size. He steps on the gas and rattles up a hill, trying to beat the game. It is himself man runs from, not the land. He can't beat it out of nothing. The country is too big and wide and open. Man can't live up to it. He just digs caves into his own pettiness and lives rotting in it.

I didn't figure all this out there, but I hain't never forgot that incident or that hour. I was headed across this country, off to the Colorado River to chase wild horses. The longer I set, the more anxious I was to get down into it.

I saddled my horses and jogged down the line. My pinto horse stepped quick with ease. The miles was short!

At sundown I reached a small town at the end of the green valley. The low country spread before me. It was thickly covered with scrub cedars and piñons. Small rough canyons cut their way into one another and led to the east.

It was a slick hiding place for a weak race of people. Underneath every rim and ledge was the signs of tribes of Indians that had lived and fought and then passed away, leaving nothing but small ruins of rock houses built for protection, close against the sandstone. Piles of charcoal and ashes partly covered by the sand marked their old camps. Chips of flint from where they made their arrowheads was scattered all over the country.

I growed attached to this red-rock country but not to the people that lived in the valley. They suffered the greatest of poverty. Their poverty of ambition was even worse than their poverty of purse. They was a lazy tribe. They had sunshine and good land — too much of it. They was too lazy to plant and grow even enough food to eat. They just set and gaped at the sun. They let their mouths hang open to air their lungs out.

Their houses was shacky and dirty. Their children was ragged and uncared-for. The roughest language and profanity flowed from their mouths. The men smoked and lounged in the hot sun. The women folks slopped over their work, neglected their children, paraded the town and gossiped.

In spite of all this I stopped. I didn't care to go on. The wind was different there from any place I'd ever been. It come from distances as unpeopled as the wide expanses of the deep seas. It swept from the deserts to the mountainsides, where flowers growed and pine needles had bedded down for centuries. It was here Hard Luck overtook me. It changed me to a different man.

Opportunities danced everywheres, if a man could only work! For a while I hit it with a high spirit, but everything I started turned wrong, crumbled in my fingers and was nothing. I found many idle cowboys that was good riders and horsemen. They never done anything but drone around. There was lots of range horses, big wild active fellers. With these idle riders and horses a man should be able to start a good rodeo outfit and travel.

I talked to the boys about it. They were all up on their ear and keen to start, but when it come to the work part of gathering the horses and gitting into real action, one at a time they backed out. They was afraid it wouldn't work. Getting out of that country sounded like an awful big thing to them. I was forced to drop it.

Then I tried to go in cahoots with three or four of them, buy up what horses they was in the country, take them down on the south desert and start a real outfit. They thought that would be a good idee. We was going to get some thoroughbred stallions and put among them, break the good horses as they got old enough and ship them to Eastern markets. We just had it nicely shaped up and started when the boys got scart and quit me again. They had a million excuses, afraid they'd lose what little stuff they already had and go hungry.

In the winter time three of us started out to trap. There was plenty of fur-bearing animals in the Henry Mountains. Pelts was worth real money. It only lasted about three weeks. The boys got homesick and tired. They hankered to set in the sun, so they pulled out for town.

I stayed and worked the game a long while. Spring come, but I didn't have heart enough to try anything but a single-handed game I could play myself.

I went to hauling cord wood. That only lasted a short while. There was no sale for it. They was no big cow outfits or ranches in that country to keep the men busy. They'd go haul a little dab of wood at a time theirselves. No job lasted over three or four days.

I set in the sun longer each day. With that soft wind on my face and the sun on my head I growed satisfied with just that. I didn't want nothing more. The others all seemed to make out about as well, just setting, and I begun to do the same.

The one feller I chummed with was a big husky good-natured guy and an artist with crooked figures. Not many in the country liked him, because he always beat them at their small games. They feared his strength and action. He was the type that fell heavy for the women folks. They handled him like an old dishrag.

There was one he had selected from the rest. He thought she was a raving beauty. He chased her day and night. Often it interfered in our work.

One day he said, "There's another girl down there. You jest as well come along. She's good company and yer wastin' yer time anyhow!"

I was curious to look into the matter and went. I'd had other troubles, but this one that started now had them all shaded.

The women waited on us hand and foot. They fixed fancy lunches for us and entertained us the best they knowed how. It was a change for me, so I went down with him often. They always managed to leave me and the girl alone.

One night when we went down, she was crying. I asked her what was wrong. She said if I'd come outside, she'd tell me. I was leaning over the gate as she uncoiled her story.

She said she wasn't them people's child. They was trying to get rid of her. She had found out her folks had once lived south of there and was well fixed, but these people had had her ever since she was a baby.

I'll admit she didn't look like the rest of the outfit. She was tall and dark-complected, quick in action, high-tempered and flighty. The rest of the family was light, more heavy-set, quiet and slow. Naturally, I thought she was right. She told me they was trying to ship her off some place, and then disown her. She told me many things just like that.

They was a queer bunch of people and done funny things. The whole game looked as though she was right. I drawed it all in and told her if she needed help to call on me. Then I went home. I talked to my pal about it. He was well acquainted with her outfit. He said he hadn't thought about it, but he'd noticed she'd always been treated different from the rest.

In the meantime I'd thought it over thoroughly — I thought. The only way I could help her was to marry her. Then I could protect her. That's where I was all to blame. I overlooked the biggest bet. A man can't protect no woman without love. Marriage without love is a crime against nature. The feller that goes into that kind of a deal short-changes every one, hisself included. And it's up to his children to pack the biggest load. I didn't do right by the girl in spite of the fact that I thought I was helping her out.

I might save her from trouble with her folks and a thousand other little tiny things that don't amount to nothing. But I could not protect her from the greater dangers in a marriage that was went into through a deceit on her part and an ignorance on mine. As for loving her, I never did, not even for one moment. And furthermore I never knowed what love was. I'd never had anything I couldn't give up and shed like a coat.

This partnership was different to any I'd ever got into. I had no way of seeing ahead. I went into it as careless like as one would dicker a moonshine deal. I figured I'd counted all the risks, but I was all wrong.

I allowed I could get along with any one, and being married might stop my wandering about. I might be able to do something for somebody else. I reckoned my life had never amounted to nothing. If I could make one person happy, what happened to me didn't matter. They could take my life and use it for what it was worth. I wanted to make up for what I hadn't done.

But this ain't enough! It ain't no way to get married. I never once thought of children. They is the only and first thing to be considered in marriage. I know now there's a grab to them a feller can't get shed of.

One night I saddled my two horses and rode down to her place. I asked her if she wanted to go for a ride. I'd been joking her mother for some time about running away with her daughter. I never meant any of it, but as we mounted the horses and started away I hollered back, to the old lady, "The next time you see us, we'll be married."

The old lady smiled and walked in the house. As we rode up the street against a cool west breeze the girl told me her people was treating her ornery. This made me half-mad.

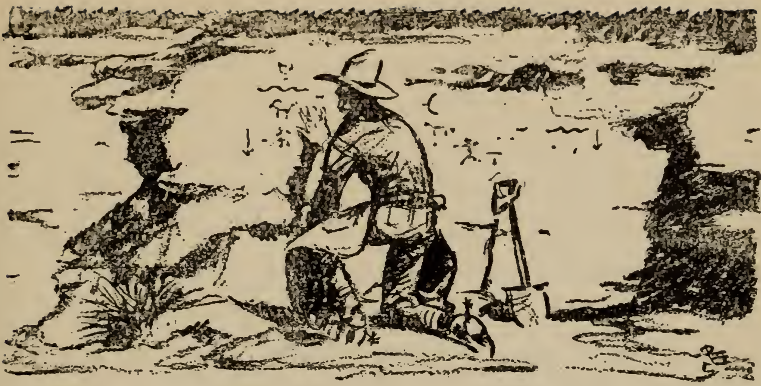
I said, "Let's finish it."

We rode all night. We got to the neighboring town for breakfast, went over and got our marriage license and was married on our horses in front of the county building.

A few of the town dads stood around and stared at my six-shooter in my belt. My horse was my best man and pawed around nervous like. Nobody climbed the church steeple to ring our wedding bells but the fire wagon clanged by and about broke up the ceremony.

I never once thought of what I was doing. She seemed pleased. She smiled all the while as we rode towards home. Our conversation run on the same line as it always had.

We stopped at the old folks' place a day or two. They made me more than welcome. It was only a short while till I found a place and we moved to ourselves.



CHAPTER XXXI · MOONSHINING

Then I scoured the country for work. There was no steady jobs to be had. I worked a day or two here and there, taking anything I could use for pay. I wanted to build a real home, but I found out there was no sale for honest elbow grease.

So I and my big lazy pal drifted into cattle rustling. This work was hard and small pay for the chances we took. It was one beef, where I'd been used to getting fifty. We'd take it off the mountains, bring it to the edge of the valley and butcher it in a deep rocky canyon where few people traveled. It was easy to get rid of the hides and the other worthless parts by hiding them among the rocks and cracks in the ledges. We carried the beef on pack horses to the neighboring towns, where we sold it to the butchers for a small price. They had to have a rake-off too. They knowed it was stole.

The saloons was closed down about that time and the country hankered for whisky, so we started a moonshining game. We knowed little about the making of whisky so we built a still out of a copper boiler and stole gas lines off automobiles till we got enough copper pipe. We soldered it together and made a worm. We run on a small scale till we sold enough rotten whisky at a fancy price to build a real outfit. Then we moved twelve miles back into the mountains.

Hiding places was as plentiful as a man could ask for in a game like this. A heavy beaten forest ranger's trail follered along the foot of the mountain. We took it and turned off where it crossed a long strip of sandrock. Then we climbed a sidehill covered with niggerheads and boulders, coarse gravel and small sagebrush. The top of this was covered with solid sandstone and shod horses made scarcely a print on it.

A big crack, just wide enough for horses and pack outfits, dropped steep and quick into a pocket of rim rocks, water holes and caves. Long thin crooked rows of chaparral and buckbrush growed up through the cracks and around the caves in the sandstone and throwed funny shadows where a man could hide. In a half circle around the north, east and west of this pocket loomed a straight rough ledge called the Cock's Comb. No man could climb to the top of it and look down. A big cave run back underneath it for two hundred feet. That's where we set up our cooker.

Now we was hid. Nature furnished us the setting and all we had to do was climb in. The only way the law could find us was by some of it gitting lost.

We took turns, each working the outfit for a week at a time, while the other sold the whisky in the valley. We made our biggest sales at the dances and celebrations. We sold it for eight dollars a quart when we first started. Slowly other outfits pulled into the moonshining game. That started the prices to drop. Our money had been spent as easy as it come and this competition crippled us.

My outfit at home was happy the way they lived. Many of the people in that country growed jealous of us. They thought we was getting a little ahead. They tried every way to get us caught. What law there was in that country hounded and chased us all the time. We dodged right and left and had many a close call. Three years of moonshining and dodging give me nothing but a good time, and a good living. By now we had two children, a boy and a girl. I often thought of that. It would hurt them if I went to the pen. My reputation would be handed to them and sneered at as my father's had been.

When competition begun to slow up the game and my money wasn't so free, things at home tightened up for me. It seemed the more time I spent away from home the better my wife liked it. I got disgusted, dodging the law while I was working, and dishes and cuss words while at home. She drummed the small talk of the town into my ears until I got wuzzy. This town gossip wore on my nerves worse than riding broncs.

Finally I give my share of the outfit to my pal, took two of my horses and headed east across the sand, to where they traded money for honest labor. For about two years I worked hard and sent my money home.

That's where I made another big mistake. I'd always roamed and never tied to anything solid. Me being away from home, another feller pulled up my slack. Like a fool, I didn't think my gap could be filled up. When I come home I was unnecessary. The lives of my family had gone on without me and I didn't fit in. I was strange to my own children.

I decided to pull a big game, get a lot of money and leave it for my wife and the kids. There was three kids by now. They could live comfortable the rest of their lives. I'd take to the high line and be forgot. I figured me living with her, arguing and quarreling all the time, was worse for the children than it would be if I was gone.

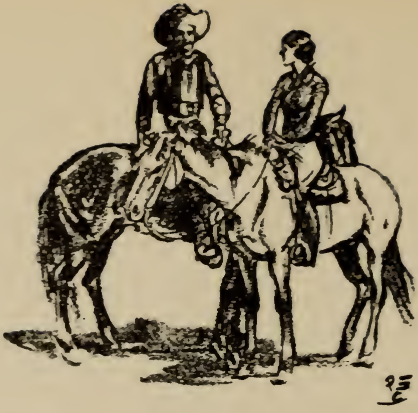
On my return I cut out all my old pals, lived quiet and spent most of my time at home. I took every job that was offered me and worked for small pay.

The moonshiners was running wide open in that country. The officers was afraid to go after them. One outfit operated in the hills a few miles from town. They was of the lowest type and peddled rotten whisky to the men at any price they could get out of it. They was so low they sold to the kids ten and eleven years old. This got me. I thought of the day when my youngsters would grow up in this, and it made me mad. I cursed the low moonshiners.

I even quit talking to men unless it was a forced conversation. My spare time and Sundays I spent in the hills, digging up the old ruins of the three ancient Indian tribes that had vanished from that country. I studied these Indians from what I knowed of the Moquis and Cliff Dwellers in other countries.

I knowed how to read a few of their signs. They consisted of pictures drawed on the ledges, and was every place. I made a study of them, and found undisturbed peace of mind while at it. I worked like a tarantula. I run from one spot to another. I forgot the miserable present digging up the bones of the past.

In the meantime I hooked up with a gang of real highwaymen. One was a teller in a prominent bank in another valley and another a mail clerk on the train. The other two had pulled many a big game in the East. We planned to rob the bank with the assistance of inside work from the teller. Between him and the mail clerk they knowed when the big money was sent in over a branch line of the railroad. There was a place where the train crossed a high summit. There we could board the train, operate in the most suitable way, then take to the high rough mountains close at hand. We'd hide in close quarters where but few men traveled till the first big excitement was over. Then we'd split the stakes and each go his own way. At this certain time I was waiting for the right hour to come, figuring that I'd either get killed or captured or set free with money enough to do what I'd planned for the children.



CHAPTER XXXII · I MAKE A PROMISE

One day, as I was chasing my old black horse around the town, trying to catch him, I saw a woman riding towards me on a gray horse about a hundred yards away. She looked different from anything in that country. She was dressed in English riding trousers, wore a red blazer and no hat. She was small and trim built.

The position she held on her horse caught my eye in a second. She handled him with a free easiness. He was just a town plug, but she rode him like a thoroughbred. I knowed at a glance she was a stranger!

Her quick sharp glances told me she was hunting for something, and I just naturally reined up my old horse. The thought run through my mind, "What the devil is this? I'll just stop and find out." As she drawed closer I said to myself, "What's a woman of that type doin' here?"

Her big blue eyes, partly hidden by long dark eyelashes, drove at me and searched me curiously. I knowed she was hunting something, but what was it?

I lifted my hat and "how-de-doed" her. That wasn't customary in that country, but I knowed I'd met something that didn't belong.

She inquired where a certain feller lived. I pointed out the place to her, pulled out my tobacco and started to roll a cigarette. She interrupted by offering me one of hers.

"Sure, I'll take one of your uptown cigarettes. I like a change!"

She told me she was looking for history on the Indians. There'd been nothing wrote up on the Utes to speak of and she would like to get in touch with somebody that knowed something of them. There'd been a little stir in the country with the discovery of some old Indian shields that was supposed to be valuable. I told her the old feller she was looking for was all right. He'd knowed a lot of them in the early days.

Then I understood she was a hungry writer looking to feed on the experience of some one else!

I liked her ways — the free easiness of her. Life seemed a gay adventure for her. She took the world's good will for granted. I told her I reckoned I could help her out a little. I'd been raised among the Indians and could dance their dances, sing their songs and talk their language.

She asked me who I was. I give her my nickname and asked if she hadn't heard about me. I naturally figured nobody would stay in that town very long without hearing their wail about the town's disgrace. But somehow I'd been overlooked.

She treated me like a gentleman. It was a real shock. Most of the people in that community stood off at a distance, as though they was looking for me to cut their throats or something.

Before I knowed it we was drifting along in easy conversation. I run off at the head. I told her more about my days with the Indians in ten minutes than I'd told the world in the rest of my life. I set cross-legged on my horse and felt to home as I related the stories of my boyhood days. She asked me if I could talk to a typewriter. I told her I could talk to anything that would listen and not sass back. She asked me if I'd mind coming over that evening and giving her a few notes on the inside life of the Utes.

I said, "I'll be there at six o'clock and you can depend on it."

She rode away. I watched her close as she galloped down the street and turned the corner out of sight. I was muddled in a sort of glad haze. The picture of her was impressed on my mind.

Then I cussed myself, wondered why I'd told her so much, talked so easy and long. I thought, "I won't go over there to-night." I was darned if any writers was going to feed up on my life. But the first thing I knowed I caught myself waiting for six o'clock to come.

I told my wife where I was going that evening, and who I'd met. She said I'd better clean up if I was going over there.

"Not by a darn sight. Clothes ain't makin' nuthin' for me. If she's too darned high-toned for these clothes, she's too good to listen to my talk."

I went over. I knowed the people quite well she was stopping with. They watched me close as if to say, "What do you know about Indians?"

As I talked to the typewriter, they listened through the open doors. I smoked uptown cigarettes. I felt cool and at ease. I told her some Indian traditions and superstitions, about the way they lived and their outlook on life. I spoke in their native tongue and interpreted it.

The lady worked fast at the keys, as though she was afraid she might miss a word. She didn't seem to know I was there! I couldn't get it into my head what she wanted all this stuff for, but when quitting time come I hadn't begun to unwind, and an appointment was made for the next evening.

I worked hard the next day. The hours couldn't slip by quick enough. I was hungry to get back to the typewriter again. That evening found me on the job.

Several times we stopped writing. She inquired into my past. I felt as though I didn't need to hide anything from her. I was just naturally what I'd been and didn't care if she knowed it. She informed me that anything I told would go no farther and I knowed it wouldn't.

I told her of many crooked deals I'd pulled. They didn't seem to bother her. I felt that she trusted me. If you've never been there, gentle folks, you don't know what it means to a man that has been a crook and an outlaw to be trusted by one person. If there's a spark of man in him, he will honor confidence and live up to it.

Several nights had passed to the click of the typewriter, when she turned and looked at me.

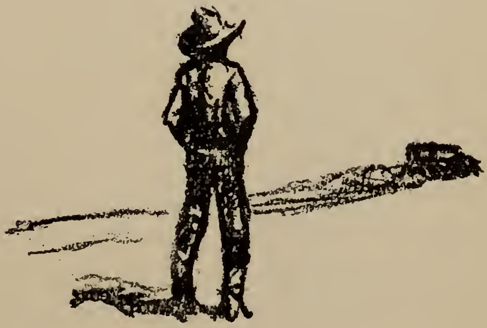
"You are no fool. Why don't you quit this crooked life and try to be honest? There's a million ways you can get by in this world!"

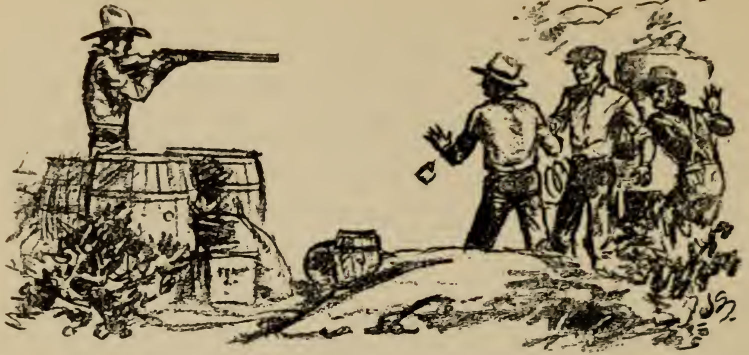
I told her I'd never thought it over much, but of late I'd kinda been watching people that was that-away and I liked them. Then I thought of the plot I had laid ahead on the bank, and I hated to give it up. I wouldn't even promise to try to be straight.

All the next day I thought her words over. I liked the idee of it. I didn't know why. Maybe because it sounded big. But somehow I couldn't picture myself a city dude. I'd always hated city-raised people, slick shaves and up-town clothes.

A night or so later we fell from the typewriter into deep conversation. She said she was going home in a day or so and asked me if I was going to be honest. I told her perhaps I would, but if I did, it would be real honest — no halfway.

That night I went home with the idee of trying it out for a while. The next time I thought about it, I realized it had been several days since I'd done anything crooked or even lied to a person. I liked it. I thought I'd see how long I could make it last. The next day I bid the woman good-by. She and her family in a big car drove down the road out of sight, leaving nothing for me to watch but a cloud of dust.





CHAPTER XXXIII · I TURN SHERIFF

The old people in this town had finally got worked up about the moonshiners and had reported them to the officers, but received no results. One day I walked up to a couple of the old town dads and told them if I had the authority I'd run out the moonshiners.

They knowed I'd been in the game and knowed the ways of it. They got busy, and in a couple of days I was swore in as a sheriff. Then the fun started. The news went to the moonshiners. They swore loud and said if they ever caught me out they'd bump me off. They knowed there was no use trying to scare me. If I took their trail, all they could do was either move or fight.

I didn't know exactly where the one outfit was that was selling to kids. The country was rough and the trail was on sandrock for a long ways. But I knowed a bay horse one of them owned and often rode to the still.

One night I snuk down, stole this horse out of the corral, and rode him in the direction I thought was right.

He soon drooped his head and held close to a new dim trail. It was a bright moonlight night. I urged him a little with my spurs and always give him a free rein. I knowed if he'd ever been there he'd naturally think I wanted to go again. He carried me straight to the still.

I looked it over. It happened nobody was there. I turned back to town and put the horse in the corral. I figured this plan of using their own horse was a good one. I might need it again and I didn't want them to get wise.

Two days later, just at the crack of dawn, I saddled my own horse, rode up in the heavy timber half a mile from the still, tied up my horse, took my rifle and walked over. They was three of them at the works. The still was running at full blast. I crawled up on the sidehill about two hundred feet above them and hid in a big bushy cedar tree. I watched till after dark. Now and then I caught part of their conversation as the cool breeze carried it up the hillside. I was waiting for an opportunity to get right down among them, make them put up their hands and march to town.

After a while they each shouldered a small keg of white mule. Their intention was to take it down out of the rough where they could load it on their pack horses and carry it away. While they was gone, I crawled down among their mash barrels and hid.

My presence must have worked on their minds. When they returned they was talking about me. One of them sampled the liquor with a spoon, as it run out of the still, and smacked his lips.

"That's real stuff! I wonder how that would-be sheriff would like to gargle that."

I slowly raised with my rifle cocked and straight on them.

"By hell! I'll sample it, if you don't mind."

They jumped. For a second all looked at me. It was almost a surprise.

I told them, "Now looky here, I mean business. You fellers do as I say and there won't be no trouble. But the first one that makes an awkward move will jest be committin' suicide."

I lined them up against the sidehill and kicked over the still, spilling the contents. When it was cooled off, I made two of them carry the still.

It was a copper can of about a fifty-gallon capacity, light, but awkward to pack. I made the other one take the worm and headed them down the trail. It was hard to keep track of them through the brush, but I managed to get them to town. I locked them up and went back to their camp with my pack outfit. I dumped out their barrels of mash. Their sugar and camp outfits I took in and turned them over to the county.

The country was in an uproaring hellacabubble! This was the first time I'd had a good laugh in two years. At that other time I'd stood in the shadow of a cottonwood tree and bounced a rock off the bald head of a revenue officer who was hunting my moonshine cache.

I packed an internal chuckle for days. I was pulling the honest racket with a flourish. This game had more hazard than chasing wild horses. There was lead in the white mule's kick, if I snuk up behind it and I wasn't caring if I did stop some of it. If I got bumped off it was my time to go.

A month or two curled up in the hot sun. The moonshiners was twisting and sweating. My wife was cussing me and beating the kids. I watched the town at night and discovered that most every one was connected in some crooked deal. The fact I'd been there once myself didn't make me like it any better.

One night as I entered the dance hall there was a free-for-all fight on in the middle of the floor. Four drunken roughnecks was fighting and cursing at the top of their voices. The rest of the dancers formed a circle and was standing as referees.

I broke my way through the circle and lit in the middle of it. I jerked the top one off and throwed him back through the crowd, poked a couple more in the jaw and staggered them. The last one raised up slow, cursing.

"What business you got in here and how much of this country do you think you run?"

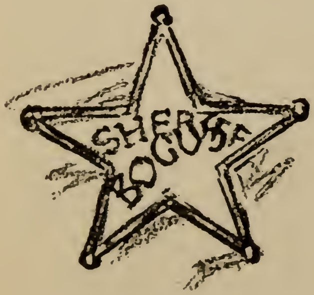
I grabbed him by the collar and said, "I run fourteen miles square of this country and if you don't believe it, start somethin' and I'll stop yer thirst fer hootch fer awhile."

He said, "You darn fool, yer buckin' this game alone and I can prove it. Even the county officials is holdin' private booze parties and toastin' you to a dirty finish."

Right there I took a hunch that he knowed more than he was telling. The crowd started to dance as I led him out of the hall. We found a place where no one could hear us. He told me how some of the head guys around there was tipping off the moonshiners and some of them I had turned in had got off with easy fines and others that put up the story that they didn't have money to pay their fines was allowed to go out and pay it off on time.

I saw it all then. He was right. The joke was on me. I had blamed myself for not connecting up the last couple of times, but this cleared it all up in my mind.

The next day I rode up to the county building, took my knife and carved the word "Bogus" in large letters across the front of my sheriff's star, went in and throwed it on the clerk's desk and walked out. I'd resigned as the town goat.



Paul S. Clowes

CHAPTER XXXIV · GITTIN' FURTHER

The next day I rode off into the hills to dig into the past. I crawled back under a rim rock and dug down two feet into the loose sand that had drifted in. I found Indian corn, cedar bark, long bunches of grass tied together, many arrow-heads and other signs that showed it was an old permanent camp. I got tired, and crawled out for fresh air to smoke and think.

I leaned back against a flat rock, wondering how these Indians had had to live. Many places they had carried water for two and three miles. All their homes was in hidden places among the ledges and rocks. Their forts and lookouts was everywhere on the high points, where they could watch the country for miles. Every sign left marks of suffering and hardship.

Now, I thought in my own way that I understood why this pressure and dull feeling hung over the country. According to signs, the first humanity that walked in it had struggled and fought to outwit starvation and death. The horror and gloom that was left there grabbed the next race as it walked in. So it was handed down from many a generation, growing stronger at the vanishing of each tribe.

I believe the spirit of man builds the spirit of the country he lives in. The world was created for man. As he orders it, so it will yield.

I could show you many countries that was built with a boom. The spirit was high, courage and daring and success was plenty. That country might go back, might die out to where it has no inhabitants. But as you ride into it, you will take on the same spirit as those that was first there. Many dark, shady countries that have a right to be gloomy have a cheerful homelike feeling. Success is there.

Others, like this one, that may look ever so bright and beautiful, is haunted with the old feeling of despair and discontent and hunger that man first brought there. Races may come and go, but their first feeling always remains. In most places of this kind if you will go to the bother to hunt, you will find ruins and signs of wars, that will prove that there has always been trouble and sorrow among men.

This great country is full of tricks. It conspires to defeat man. Spots of ground that looked clear and free from rock was a solid mass of rock two and three inches under the ground. All the fertile, clear land in the bottom of the valley that looked like it would drain, turned swampy and worthless when a high-line canal for irrigation was put in. Hills that looked as if they would hold ditches and canals would soak up water and make a moving body of mud, destroying the canal beds.

I wondered if there was any other country in the world that held the gloom and tricks of this one. It would get any man, when he saw so many things that looked possible and easy pan out a failure. He'd become disheartened and afraid to take a chance. He'd rejoice when he'd see another man fail.

Each man envied the other that had more than he did and accused him of being crooked. This bred a greed. If a man got a dollar he would hold on to it as though it was the last he'd ever have. He was certain of the one he had, but not the one he was going to get. That caused all deals to be small and figured to a penny.

But these people knowed nothing of the outside world, never went into it or invited it to come to them. They lived in ignorant discontent. Ignorant and narrow-minded people rate theirselves as being the brains of the world. They don't figure they need to add one more wrinkle to it.

Thoughts like these, together with remembering what I had at home, decided me to leave the country. I wasn't blaming any one for my troubles. I'd been able to collect them myself. I didn't know what I wanted, but I sure didn't want what I'd got.

I couldn't agree with my wife. Our home was a den of hell. I didn't want nobody that didn't want me. I'd get out of her way, and I'd never return. She could dispose of me as she liked. I'd send my earnings to my kids.

I'd always moved on. It didn't take me long to get ready again. As I was bidding my kids good-by, I looked at each one and wondered what life held for them and if they'd miss me. It was harder to leave than I thought it would be. I love my kids as much as any man can. If there was a better deal in store for me, they'd share it. I wasn't in shape to take my children with me, but I had more to hit the trail for now than I'd ever had in my life. I'd make a stake and get them out of that hole!

I lingered around them, then kissed them good-by and stepped through the gate. I tried hard to hold back the tears that blurred my eyes as I mounted my horse and rode away, their voices ringing in my ears. I looked again and waved as I spurred my horse into a gallop down the road. I'd found something at last I didn't want to shed, and by hell I wouldn't!

Children change a man. Am I going to help mine or not? You never know what a child is going to be. You never know whether plenty and good care and never-to-want will build him up in the long run or tear him down. I am as heartsick now as I was when I left. I am hurt with the thought of my children. Will life give me the chance to give them what life stole from me? Or did it steal anything?

Now, I've told my story as far as it has gone. You can guess the rest as well as I can. Can a man outrun his environment? Can he outdistance his past? If there is an honest world, have I anything to take into it?

The middle of that afternoon brought me near the top of the mountain where I'd first looked at this valley of trouble. It was dark in the north. A blizzard was sweeping down on it.

I turned my horse and dismounted. I stood with my arm around his neck as I watched until the blizzard wrapped the country in blackness and hid it from my view. I was glad. It was as black as I thought it should be. Then I mounted my horse and rose slowly over the hill.

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